

ESMO Palliative Care Fellowship (01 July 2024 – 16 August 2024)

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FINAL REPORT

Home Institute: Oncology Teaching Hospital, Baghdad, Iraq

Host Institute: Fundación Jiménez Díaz Hospital Universitario, Madrid, Spain

Mentor: Jesus Garcia-Foncillas

Introduction

Palliative care significantly improves the quality of life for patients and their families facing life-threatening illnesses, particularly cancer. A comprehensive approach to palliative care encompasses a wide range of services provided by physicians, nurses, social workers, psychotherapists, hospice units and home visit teams, each playing a vital role.

Cancer patients often endure a multitude of agonising physical and psychological symptoms due to the course of the disease and its treatment, while their families experience considerable emotional distress from caregiving responsibilities. As a medical oncologist who lost my father to stomach cancer, I deeply understand the crucial role of palliative care in the cancer treatment journey. Its primary aim is not to prolong survival, but effective palliative care can alleviate debilitating symptoms, improve overall life quality and reduce the financial burden of healthcare.

In Iraq, palliative care remains in its nascent stage, facing significant challenges due to social ideology transformations, a lack of relevant institutions and trained personnel. The increasing incidence of advanced-stage cancer in Iraq underscores the urgent need to help patients and their families accept and navigate palliative care. Promoting universal education on palliative care ethics and improving service delivery are critical steps in this direction. Despite advancements in cancer diagnostics and treatments, symptoms continue to be a major source of distress for patients, often intensifying towards the end of life and necessitating proper management. Unfortunately, there is still a pervasive lack of awareness and specialisation in palliative care within Iraq.

My career in medical oncology, particularly my focus on palliative medicine, aligns with the objectives of the ESMO Palliative Care Fellowship. I was honoured to be awarded this fellowship in 2023. Although my commencement was delayed due to visa issues, I successfully completed the fellowship in 2024 with the invaluable support of Prof. Jesus Garcia-Foncillas and the ESMO Designated Centres Team.

Goals or aims

My fellowship research aims to study and observe palliative care services in Iraq, estimate symptom prevalence and intensity, and evaluate symptom burden in advanced cancer patients. It seeks to discuss the impact of early palliative care on symptom control, quality of life and cost of care. Additionally, I will formulate strategies to improve early palliative care access through education and research. My goal is to participate in clinical research and bring the acquired skills from the ESMO fellowship back to enhance palliative care services at my home institute.

Description of the time spent at host institute

During my fellowship at the Fundación Jiménez Díaz Hospital Universitario (FJD), an ESMO accredited Designated Centre, I experienced the comprehensive palliative care provided by their Supportive and Palliative Care Unit. Additionally, I visited the Beata Maria Ana Hospital for hospice care and accompanied the home visit team to counsel cancer patients who are unable to attend the hospital.

The palliative care team at FJD comprises a multidisciplinary group including doctors, nurses, social workers, spiritual care providers, occupational and physiotherapists, pharmacists, research assistants, community program coordinators and volunteers.

My fellowship was divided into clinical observation and palliative care research:

Clinical Observation:

I participated in outpatient consultation clinics, morning handovers, ward rounds and tumour board (MDT) meetings. Observing the roles of psychotherapists, community programmes, nurses and social workers enriched my understanding of integrated palliative care. I also joined the home visit team which supports patients discharged from FJD who cannot return to the hospital. This team, along with the Virtual Palliative Care Clinic, ensures continuous care through close coordination with community-based practitioners and the patients' general medical practitioners. Additionally, I observed the Palliative Care Team within the Oncology Department at Beata Maria Ana Hospital, where I engaged in ward rounds and MDT meetings. This provided insights into the integration of palliative care within oncology. I also participated in the Phase I clinical trial (START office) for patients with advanced cancer and visited the Onco-Pain Clinic to learn about advanced pain control planning.

Palliative Care Research:

I engaged in the research project "Evaluating The Impact of Palliative Care on Symptom Control and Cost of Care in Patients with Advanced Cancer in Iraq". Under the guidance of Prof. Jesus Garcia-Foncillas, I learned implementation research strategies, including survey design, interview procedures, content translation and qualitative data analysis. A rapid literature review supported my research, furthering my knowledge of systematic review methods. Additionally, I attended palliative care meetings and a journal club as part of the Palliative Care Research Group.

Overall, my fellowship at FJD provided a holistic view of palliative care, integrating clinical practice with research and fostering a deeper understanding of multidisciplinary care approaches.

Conclusion

The ESMO Palliative Care Fellowship has been an exceptional opportunity that has profoundly enriched my knowledge of palliative care. I am deeply grateful to ESMO for selecting me and feel truly fortunate to have been part of Prof. Jesus Garcia-Foncillas' research group and the dedicated Palliative Care Team at FJD in Madrid. The invaluable experience gained has significantly expanded my expertise in oncology and palliative care. As the Head of Medical Oncology in my home institute, I am committed to transferring these insights to enhance our palliative care services within my institute. Furthermore, I hope to foster a lasting collaboration between the FJD Palliative Care Team and my home hospital, aiming to elevate palliative care practices in Iraq.

In conclusion, advancing palliative care in Iraq necessitates a comprehensive approach involving education, awareness and institutional support. With the knowledge and experience gained from the ESMO Palliative Care Fellowship, I am dedicated to ensuring that palliative care becomes an integral part of cancer treatment in Iraq.

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- Elena Force Castells, Psycho-oncologist and palliative care specialist at Hospital Universitario Fundación Jiménez Díaz, Madrid, Spain.
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- Dr. Ahmed Zuhair Al-Samarraee: Board-Certified Medical Oncologist, Head of Scientific Committee at the Oncology Teaching Hospital, Secretary General of the Iraqi Society of Clinical Oncology, Baghdad, Iraq.

