

Perceptions and health-seeking behaviors of older patients with gastric cancer: a descriptive qualitative study in China

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Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to explore the perceptions and health-seeking behaviors of older patients with gastric cancer in China.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This study was a descriptive qualitative study. Twelve key informants were purposively recruited. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions of each key informant were analyzed using the content analysis method.*

Findings – *Six themes emerged: (1) illness perceptions – gastric cancer was understood as growth and spread in the body, closely linked to death and viewed as destiny; (2) discomforts – physical discomfort (e.g. pain, dyspepsia, weight loss, black stool and sensory changes) and psychological discomfort (e.g. fear, sadness, worry, loneliness and guilt) were perceived; (3) coping style – self-regulation and active cooperation with treatment alongside family and professional support; (4) hospital and doctor selection – influenced by hospital qualifications, specialist expertise, acquaintances' recommendations and accessibility; (5) difficulty in seeking medical treatment – resource constraints, costs, complex procedures and limited digital or health literacy; and (6) seeking health information – reliance on professionals and family due to low health literacy.*

Practical implications – *The health-care team should enhance communication and education, simplify care procedures and provide individualized psychological and informational support. Strengthening family engagement and accessible health education can promote earlier help-seeking and improve continuity of care.*

Originality/value – *Perceptions and health-seeking behaviors among older patients were a critical point, as they confronted discomfort and difficulty in dealing with their health problems. These issues may stem from interrelated cultural, emotional and health education support system barriers that influence their health-seeking behaviors.*

Keywords *Gastric cancer, Older, Health-seeking behavior, Qualitative study*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Gastric cancer is one of the most prevalent malignant tumors worldwide and the third leading cause of cancer-related mortality. More than 1.1 million new cases are reported annually, and the incidence increases sharply with age (Yang *et al.*, 2023). In China, gastric cancer poses a particularly severe public health burden, accounting for nearly half of all global deaths related to the disease. Older adults represent the most affected group, with over 270,000 new cases reported in 2022 alone (Han *et al.*, 2024). Although diagnostic and therapeutic options continue to improve, many older patients are diagnosed at a late stage and often live with multiple comorbidities, which limit treatment options and compromise their quality of life (Han *et al.*, 2024). Gastric cancer in older patients sees age-related physiological changes contribute further to vulnerability. Helicobacter pylori infection is highly prevalent in older adults and often persists for decades, which contributes to chronic

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.