Living and dying with severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: multi-perspective longitudinal qualitative study

Hilary Pinnock, senior clinical research fellow,1 Marilyn Kendall, senior research fellow,2 Scott A Murray, St Columba’s Hospice chair of primary palliative care,2 Allison Worth, senior research fellow, research manager,1 Pamela Levack, consultant in palliative medicine,3 Mike Porter, senior lecturer,4 William MacNee, professor of respiratory and environmental medicine,3 Aziz Sheikh, professor of primary care research and development1

ABSTRACT

Objectives To understand the perspectives of people with severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) as their illness progresses, and of their informal and professional carers, to inform provision of care for people living and dying with COPD.

Design Up to four serial qualitative interviews were conducted with each patient and nominated carer over 18 months. Interviews were transcribed and analysed both thematically and as narratives.

Participants 21 patients, and 13 informal carers (a family member, friend, or neighbour) and 18 professional carers (a key health or social care professional) nominated by the patients.


Results Eleven patients died during the study period. Our final dataset comprised 92 interviews (23 conducted with patient and informal carer together). Severe symptoms that caused major disruption to normal life were described, often in terms implying acceptance of the situation as a “way of life” rather than an “illness.” Patients and their informal carers adapted to and accepted the debilitating symptoms of a lifelong condition.

Professional carers’ familiarity with the patients’ condition, typically over many years, and prognostic uncertainty contributed to the difficulty of recognising and actively managing end stage disease. Overall, patients told a “chaos narrative” of their illness that was indistinguishable from their life story, with no clear beginning and an unanticipated end described in terms comparable with attitudes to death in a normal elderly population.

Conclusions Our findings challenge current assumptions underpinning provision of end of life care for people with COPD. The policy focus on identifying a time point for transition to palliative care has little resonance for people with COPD or their clinicians and is counter productive if it distracts from early phased introduction of supportive care. Careful assessment of possible supportive and palliative care needs should be triggered at key disease milestones along a lifetime journey with COPD, in particular after hospital admission for an exacerbation.

INTRODUCTION

“Well, end stage is from the beginning, isn’t it, to a certain extent?” [F07.2 Nurse]

Globally, long term conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are responsible for an increasing proportion of deaths.1 Cancer based palliative care services, predicated on an ability to predict a terminal phase of disease,23 are being extended to encompass people dying with non-malignant disease.4 Prognostic indicators have been developed to aid identification of people “at risk of dying,” whose physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs can be assessed and their care planned.27 There is concern, however, that the slow physical decline of patients with COPD, which is punctuated by potentially serious but unpredictable disease exacerbations, may lead to prevarication rather than provision of anticipatory care.8

About half of patients discharged after a hospital admission for COPD will die within two years.9 Markers such as severity of disease, poor nutritional status, comorbid heart disease, depression, impaired quality of life, and older age have all been shown to be associated with an overall poor prognosis.910 Accurate predictions of life expectancy for individual patients with COPD, however, remain extremely difficult.711 This difficulty with prognosis is compounded by a tendency for doctors who are familiar with patients to overestimate survival.12 The only condition where prognosis is less accurate is dementia.11

People with very severe COPD have a well recognised burden of disabling physical symptoms (especially breathlessness), compounded by comorbidity, psychological distress, and social isolation.13-17 Despite these issues, the needs of these patients are typically poorly addressed, and many patients have limited access to specialist palliative care services.1314 The consultation on a strategy for services for COPD in England18 and the standards of care for COPD in Scotland19—which advocate adopting a lifelong approach to preventing, diagnosing, and providing care for people with COPD—acknowledge this
deficiency and prioritise access to improved end of life care for those “sick enough to die.”

To inform current deliberations on how best to provide care for people living and dying with COPD, we undertook an in-depth inquiry seeking to understand the end of life needs of affected patients and their informal and professional carers.

METHODS

Our study took place over 18 months during 2007-9. Ethical approval was obtained from the Multicentre Research Ethics Committee for Scotland (B), and governance approval was obtained from NHS Lothian, NHS Tayside, and NHS Forth Valley.

Longitudinal qualitative research using multi-perspective, serial interviews offers advantages over the more usual single “snapshot” qualitative techniques in understanding patients’ and family carers’ evolving and dynamic experience of illness (box 1).20,21 In this study, we invited patients and their nominated informal and professional carers to take part in up to four interviews at 6-9 month intervals. Multi-disciplinary perspectives from the research team, an end of study workshop, and views of a lay advisory group were used to ensure breadth of interpretation of the data.22

Patient recruitment

Primary and secondary care clinicians from general practices (recruited through the Scottish Primary Care Research Network) or from hospital and community specialist respiratory services in Lothian, Tayside, and Forth Valley, Scotland, identified patients with end stage COPD. We provided information about the known predictors of a poor prognosis to aid identification of such patients,7 but specifically suggested that they should use the “surprise question”—“Would I be surprised if my patient were to die in the next 12 months?”8—to identify potential participants. We purposefully sampled to recruit men and women with different ages, social class, rurality, presence of an informal carer within the home, and current smoking status. Significant comorbidity was expected; the only exclusion criteria were inability to participate (for example, because of dementia) or other imminently life threatening illness (for example, lung cancer). A clinical assessment by a respiratory nurse established eligibility, indicators of severity, and markers known to be associated with poor prognosis.7

Recruitment of an “interview set”

At each time point, patients nominated for interview an informal carer (for example, a family member, friend, or neighbour), if they had one, and a key health or social care professional whom they regarded as important to their care at that time, thereby creating “interview sets.” The person(s) nominated could differ at different time points. Our previous studies suggested a sample of 16-20 interview sets would be sufficient to reach data saturation.20

Consent

Informed written consent was obtained from all patients at the beginning of the study and reviewed verbally before each interview. Informal and professional carers identified by the patient were asked independently for their consent to participate. Withdrawal of a patient’s consent terminated the interview set. If an informal or professional carer withdrew, interviews were allowed to continue with other members of the interview set.

Data generation

A social scientist (MK) carried out the interviews with patients and informal carers at a location of their choice, and with professional carers by phone. In-depth interviews with the patient and his or her informal carers jointly, if preferred by the patient were participant led, allowing people to tell their story in their own terms and at their own pace. Issues covered included the experience of living with COPD, the patient’s main concerns (whether physical, psychological, social, or spiritual), views on care and treatment, and carers’ needs and concerns (for topic guides see web appendix 1 on bmj.com). Interviews lasted between 40 and 150 minutes and were all audio recorded, with consent. Field notes were recorded after each interview.

Health and social care professionals were asked about their perception of the patients’ and informal carers’ needs, available services, and barriers to the provision of care. Bereavement interviews were, where possible, conducted with both informal and professional carers. As we came to appreciate the effect of the very long disease trajectory of COPD, we used subsequent interviews specifically to explore the patients’ “story” of their condition.

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**Box 1: Features of serial multi-perspective interviews**

**Advantages**

- Give important insights into patients’ changing experiences over the course of an illness
- Enable an understanding of relationships and dynamics between patients, their families, and their professional carers
- Enable an exploration of similarities and differences in the perceptions of patients and their family and professional carers
- Enable an understanding of (potentially contrasting) individual needs of patients, informal carers, and professional carers
- Facilitate integration of suggestions for improving services from patients, informal carers, and professional carers
- Allow the development of a relationship between the patient and the researcher as a result of increased contact with participants, which facilitates discussion of sensitive issues

**Disadvantages**

- Increased complexity of recruitment
- Need to be sensitive to the disadvantages (as well as the advantages) if the patient opts for a joint interview with their informal carer
- Potential for breaches of confidentiality if information from one informant is (inadvertently) relayed to another
This is the least heard narrative because "sentry narratives cannot be told. The story can only be lived chaos and vice versa."

3) Chaos narrative

"This happened. Later on this happened. And also this happened" This is the least heard narrative because "lived chaos" cannot be told. The story can only begin to emerge once there is an ability, however tenuous, to stand outside the chaos. Telling and hearing a chaos narrative is frustrating because it appears disjointed and without causal sequence or purpose (an anti-narrative).

Box 2: Frank’s typology of illness narratives

Arthur Frank’s classic text The wounded storyteller: body, illness and ethics (1995) suggests three main types of illness narrative25

1) Restitution narrative

"Yesterday I was healthy, today I am sick, but tomorrow I will be healthy again"

This narrative recounts a belief in a restoration to health and portrays illness as transitory. It is the easiest narrative to tell and to hear.

2) Quest narrative

"I have a healthy problem but I’m using the experience to improve the situation (for myself or others)"

In this narrative the patient uses the illness experience as an opportunity to embark on a personal quest; for example, to adjust to life with illness or to improve care and support for people with a particular condition. This narrative portrays illness as an opportunity to learn and improve, and is often found in celebrity accounts.

3) Chaos narrative

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Table 1 | Characteristics of the 21 patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease interviewed for the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex (male/female)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (years; mean (SD; range))</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health board</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lothian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forth Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demography</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with family carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family carer local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No family carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smoking status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-smoker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comorbid disease (one or more comorbidity)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical history</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of symptoms (years; mean (SD))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using oxygen at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of admissions for exacerbations of COPD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of admissions with respiratory failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Severity of COPD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirometry FEV₁ (litres; mean (SD))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicted FEV₁ (%; mean (SD))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxygen saturation on air (%; mean (SD))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Research Council dyspnoea score (mean (SD))</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Impact of disease</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St George’s respiratory questionnaire (mean (SD))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospital anxiety and depression scale, anxiety subscore (mean (SD))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital anxiety and depression scale, depression subscore (mean (SD))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are numbers of patients unless otherwise specified. COPD=chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; FEV₁=forced expiratory volume in one second.
*None of the patients were from ethnic minority backgrounds.
†FEV₁<70% is the threshold for COPD.
‡Scale 1-5, 5 is most breathless.
§Scale 0-100, higher scores indicate worse quality of life.
**Scores above 11 indicate considerable anxiety or depression.

I Acceptance of COPD as “a way of life”

Apparent throughout the patients’ interviews was a sense of “acceptance” in the face of severe disease and social difficulties. COPD was something that had to be coped with “as best you can” [F07.1]. Distressing breathlessness was accepted as “the way it has worked out” [F02.1]. Patients did not actively seek out information about their condition; indeed several patients indicated that they would “rather not know” [F07.1]. For many patients their situation was made considerably worse by unsuitable housing that they seemed powerless to influence, leaving them “to do the best you can with what you’ve got” [F02.1].

“Oh I don’t ask for anything do I? So, if I asked I think I would get, I am quite sure I would because I do get excellent help from the doctors, so as I say I don’t ask . . . we manage as we are, yes, but for how long I don’t know.” [F10.1]

Although this passivity might be construed negatively, or as weary resignation to insurmountable problems, in some contexts it could also be seen as representing an appropriate adaptation to a way of life. Interviewer: “What has helped you most over these last two years that I’ve been coming to see you?” Patient F10.4: “Learning to accept it. To stop fighting against it and just accept it in my mind.”

The only exception was a relatively young patient with α-tantitrypsin deficiency. He and his wife had actively searched for information on the internet, joined a national organisation for people with “Alpha 1,” and campaigned to improve their circumstances. “I’ve done a lot of shouting at the council for four years to get re-housed and it didn’t do much. I had to threaten them with a lawsuit.” [L06.1 wife]

II The story of COPD

An early observation was the contrast between the chaotic stories told by people with COPD and the well constructed and rehearsed narratives of people with, for example, lung cancer. Patients with COPD struggled to tell a coherent illness story distinct from their life story. These data are summarised in table 3.

A story with no beginning

It proved impossible for our participants to identify a “beginning” to their COPD story. Some simply acknowledged that they had “always been bothered” [L03.1] with symptoms that dated back to their “younger years” [T06.1]. Others identified a milestone (for example, point of diagnosis or a severe exacerbation) and used it as a beginning, although it was clear that disabling symptoms had preceded this beginning by many years. A different beginning could be selected in subsequent accounts, demonstrating the fluidity of the stories.

Some patients responded with well structured stories of unrelated health problems (“I had a major op in the infirmary . . . They thought I had cancer.” [L04.1]). Others answered the question of “when?” by explaining “how” smoking or their job had caused the symptoms.

Interviewer: “So when did it all start?”
Informal carer T05.1 [wife]: “See he was a smoker . . .” Patient T05.1: “We used to put that rubber on carpets and vulcanise it . . . we manage as we are, yes, but for how long I don’t know.”
Table 2 | Conventions for describing patients and interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patients</td>
<td>Identified by a consecutive study number and the health board in which they are registered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L = Lothian, F = Forth Valley, T = Tayside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[L01], [L02]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Patient interviews identified by the time point at which the interview took place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Baseline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 = 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 = 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 = 18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[T03.1] is Tayside patient 3, baseline interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[F06.3 GP] is the GP nominated by Forth Valley patient 6 at the 12 month time point</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for many years before diagnosis, the story was told as a sudden disruption to life.

Informal carer L06.1 wife: “Day before the wedding we found out he was basically a dying man.”

Interviewer: “Good heavens, how awful!”

Patient L06.1: “So my lungs was away and I was 41. That must have been a shock.

Interviewer: “That must have been a shock.”

Informal carer L06.1 wife: “Slightly!”

Patient L06.1: Because I was always active as a worker like, 18 hours a day sometimes, always busy then suddenly it was stop, because I couldn’t do it anymore.”

A middle that is a way of life

Unlike the narratives of people with cancer and heart failure, where accounts of the period from diagnosis are characterised by a clear sense of a developing plot with one event leading to another,26 the patients with COPD told “chaos narratives” characterised by directionless stories that were typically indistinguishable from their life story and natural ageing.

“I fear I am getting worse (which is understandable), it’s like any other illness. It’s like ageing, you are getting older and that really is the illness is getting worse as well.” [F06.1]

The participants told illness narratives about their exacerbations (for example, being increasingly breathless and rushed into hospital) or a referral for assessment for lung transplantation (such as having high hopes that were dashed after complex assessments at a distant hospital). Exacerbations were described as independent episodes interrupting “normal” life; there was little sense of a linkage, or a developing trajectory. The very slow evolution of COPD meant that some participants who had experienced a long interval between exacerbations were almost able to tell a “restoration narrative.” Table 4 shows a restitution narrative told by a 75 year old man [T01] who was able to describe himself as “well” after several months in which his very severe COPD was relatively stable. This is set against a background of a chaos narrative in which little changes over the 18 month study.

Although clinicians were aware of the chronic dete-
riorating nature of COPD, they told a parallel story of a “way of life” and colluded (at least linguistically) with the idea that the patient was “well” between exacerbations.

“People like Mr X who doesn’t really bother us that much, we really only see him when he’s not well.” [F08.1 GP]

By contrast, the patient with α1 antitrypsin deficiency and his wife told a classic “quest” narrative. They knew and accepted that the story would end in his death, but were determined to use the intervening time fighting to improve care for him and others with the condition.

“They’re not interested in people like us, as I say, well, because we’ve got . . . the wrong illness, the wrong age, well, they’ve freely admitted he’s too young!” [L06.3 wife]

An unpredictable and unanticipated end

Patients were aware that their symptoms were severe and appreciated that the future was uncertain, but—consistent with the chaos narrative—the “end” was described in terms reminiscent of a normal expectation of death rather than as an anticipated consequence of an unfolding story. In keeping with findings from surveys of attitudes to death among the public in the United Kingdom,27 our participants were aware of their own mortality (for example, an 85 year old patient commented that she “did not know” whether she would still be alive for future interviews[L05.1]).

Death, however, was generally not considered as an imminent threat, and end of life wishes were generally not discussed with professional carers, friends, or family.

“I know when the nurse first said, ‘I’m referring you to a [day centre run by the local hospice] I thought oh God! This isn’t terminal! Not me!’” [T01.3]

In telling the story of an exacerbation, several patients said “I thought I was going to die” (in the
past tense), but in keeping with the restitutio narrative of the acute attack, once they were restored to normal the threat receded. Interestingly, the professional carers sometimes used language that echoed the patients’ normalisation of the prospect of death.

... we are all going to die aren’t we? But it is a case of picking the time and place [to discuss it].” [L06.1 hospital doctor]

Professional carers were aware that patients were deteriorating, but a transition point for palliative care was elusive. The uncertain prognosis (“Is this it? Another year? Three years?”) [F09.1 nurse] “... he has been knocking on deaths door a few times now. I think the last time he came into the Royal we really didn’t think he was going to make it through the night, never mind go home.” [L06.1 hospital doctor]

Unlooked for
Very occasionally I’ll bring it [death] up but no... I don’t think generally they think they are going to die of that, it is COPD.” [T01.4 nurse]
Table 4 | An example of a “restitution narrative” told against a background of a “chaos narrative” in which little changes over the 18 months study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time point</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Context and field notes recorded immediately after the interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Interview one (May 2007) | "It started off as a chest infection that I couldn't get rid of. It was going and it sort of cleared up then a month later it was back again. Then that sort of cleared up and finally got it cleared up then, but then it was largely my fault because I have always been one for 'oh I'll work it off: just didn't work off.' Interviewer: 'What have you been told about your illness, the cause and treatment, and the progress?' "Well, I've been told; I think I've been told what they know, which isn't really a great deal considering."
"I've never heard of COPD. I think it's just a catch all for asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, and that." | The episode selected as the beginning of the story was the one that finally triggered a diagnosis of COPD. He blames his lifestyle rather than an underlying disease for the slow resolution. Typically for a chaos narrative, there is a general lack of enquiry about and "evaluation" of this new diagnosis perhaps because in reality he had been symptomatic for many years. |
| Interview two (November 2007) | "I had been having a lot of chest infections, two in three weeks, but now I feel fine again. I am not so tired as I used to be and I am breathing better, not much but . . . I am getting on better at the gym. I am actually feeling much better." | The researcher’s field notes record a fragmented conversation in which he was "trying to give me answers but with no story to give."
Descriptions of intermittent chest infections interrupt when he is back to "normal." |
| Interview three (July 2008) | Interviewer: "So how are you?"
"I'm very well. Well, I feel very well. They tell me I'm not." Interviewer: "I really just came to catch up with you know, what's happened since last time."
"Well, I've improved!"
"Nothing's changed. Same old same old! And I'm quite happy with that." | The most positive of the interviews because the patient has not had an exacerbation for some months, allowing him to tell an upbeat public story which is almost a restitution narrative.
There is, however, a dual narrative: in reality nothing has changed. |
| Interview four (May 2009) | "Now I'm fine, but I had a bad time over Christmas. I got a chest infection at the beginning of December and it took me till Feb to shake it off. But no, I'm fine again now. Back to normal." | The field notes describe a “punctured tale of recovery” owing to a troublesome exacerbation.
At the end of the study the researcher noted "his story is that things are the same after two years—they are not worse, they are not better either, so now we are back to the chaos narrative." |


to do something” to acknowledging “for the rest literally what can we do?” [F07.2 nurse]. In contrast to consultations with people with cancer where “I think it seems to come up more naturally to talk about [death]” [L03.1 GP], a familiar and comfortable pattern of consulting prevented initiating an unlooked for discussion about the future.

Interviewer: “I was going to ask you whether you have talked to him at all about what might happen in the future and how things might progress?”

Professional carer L04.1 [GP]: “No, not really. He usually has got his own [agenda in the consultation]. It’s more reassurance about how he is and chatting generally and he just likes a bit of social discourse I think.”

Again, an exception was the patient with α1 antitrypsin deficiency, who was one of only two participants in our study to have discussed the end with his doctors.

He and his wife spoke openly from the very beginning of the first interview about his death and their plans for it. When faced with a decision about the use of morphine in a potentially life threatening exacerbation, his wife referred to their plans for future care.

“IT wasn’t a difficult decision for me actually because having spoken about it at length before, you know, when he had bad episodes, about, you know, what we wanted to happen etc.” [L06.1 wife]

End of study workshop: comments on the data

Participants in the end of study workshop offered additional explanations for our observation of acceptance of the way of life among patients with COPD and debated the practicalities of providing supportive end of life care in the context of a condition in which it is not possible to identify a time point for transition to the palliative care approach (box 3).

Discussion

Summary of findings

The participants in our study described severe symptoms that caused major disruption to normal life, but often in terms implying acceptance of the situation as a way of life rather than an illness. The chaos narratives of their disease stories were impossible to distinguish from their life stories, lacked a clear beginning, and had an unpredictable and unanticipated end. Professional carers’ perspectives echoed this chaos narrative, contributing to the difficulty in defining a point when palliative care might be appropriate. The policy focus on identifying a time point for transition to palliative care has little resonance with these accounts from patients, informal carers, and professional carers, and may be counterproductive if it distracts professional carers from timely consideration of providing much needed supportive care.

Passive acceptance, weary resignation, or comfortable adaptation?

The social and clinical burden described by our study participants reflects accounts in the current literature.4,17 Some researchers have commented on a sense of “sad resignation”29 and a tendency for people with COPD to “marginalise” their condition as the result of “old age.”20 Delegates at the end of study workshop suggested a range of explanations for this “passive acceptance,” including “stoicism,” “weary resignation” after years of futile attempts to improve their circumstances, “recalibration” analogous to the response shift recognised in quality of life research,30 or an adaptive coping strategy. Habraken et al attributed the “silence” of people with end stage COPD to them considering their limitations as normal and regarding themselves as ill only during acute...
exacerbations. Our data support this interpretation and enable us to offer a theoretically based interpretation.

Not so much an illness, more a way of life
In her seminal book *Hard earned lives: accounts of health and illness from East London* (1984), Cornwell identifies three categories of health problems: normal illnesses, real illnesses, and health problems that are not illnesses (table 5). Although our study participants all recognised the current ‘reality’ of their illness, the lack of story, the causal link with lifestyle, and the lifelong trajectory of the disease suggest that, despite the severity of their symptoms, they classified COPD as a health problem that is not an illness. Symptoms were described as stemming from a lifetime of exposure to fumes, smoking, or both, and breathlessness was considered “part of getting older.” By contrast, exacerbations were often classified as real illnesses, but once the acute episode was over patients felt they were “back to normal.” The only exception was the man with α1 anti-trypsin deficiency, in whom a genetic cause, a clear medical diagnosis, a young age, and severe symptoms signified a real illness.

The lack of biographical disruption
The term “biographical disruption” describes the major disruptive experience of developing a chronic illness and the consequent rethinking of a person’s biography and self-concept. More recently, the idea of a “biographically anticipated” event—exemplified by older peoples’ experience of osteoarthritis and stroke—considers that for some people in some circumstances, certain illnesses can be a “normal crisis.” Our findings extend these concepts by showing that in a very slowly progressive condition such as COPD, patients may have no sense of biographical disruption at all. In such individuals there is no illness narrative separate from their life narrative—rather, our study shows that people gradually adjust their sense of self over the years to fit within the limitations imposed by the condition. This lack of disruption may be at the root of the patients’ and carers’ acceptance and passivity, such that they neither demand nor use services. Clinicians, especially those who have a long term relationship with the patient, may share this passive acceptance of the patient’s way of life, contributing to the difficulties in identifying a transition point to palliative care.

The lack of a public story
Cancer has a well publicised “public story” in which death plays a prominent role. People with cancer are aware that they have a potentially fatal condition and tell a dual narrative of despair (“I’m going to die”) balanced by hope (“but I might get better”). By contrast, COPD is a relatively unknown condition—even the name causes confusion—with no public story to which patients can relate. As such patients often have no expectation of death and no despair, and equally no hope of cure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Categories of health problems according to Cornwell’s book <em>Hard earned lives: accounts of health and illness from East London</em> (1984)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal Illnesses</td>
<td>Acute conditions that medicine recognises and treats successfully. Childhood ailments and commonplace, relatively minor infections are typical examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Illnesses</td>
<td>Chronic disabling conditions or more severe or life threatening conditions that medicine has a partial ability to treat. Conditions such as diabetes or epilepsy that have a clear medical diagnosis, a significant effect on the patient, and that require ongoing treatment are typical of &quot;real illnesses.&quot; Seeking medical advice is thus an appropriate response to having a real illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health problems that are not illnesses</td>
<td>Problems associated with normal processes (for example, age related arthritis or hearing loss) or stem from the person’s lifestyle (e.g. a backache in a man with a heavy job). &quot;Health problems that are not illnesses&quot; are to be &quot;coped with&quot;; seeking medical advice is not necessarily appropriate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparison with other illness trajectories

Our findings raise interesting comparisons with other disease trajectories. COPD has a lifelong trajectory (effectively from the first exposure to cigarette smoke, which may be in utero), and the onset of symptoms is so insidious as to be imperceptible. In contrast, despite their chronic nature, most other types of long term organ failure typically have a relatively acute presentation (for example, myocardial infarction may present as heart failure).

Another comparator might be patients who have congenital conditions. The concept of “continual biographical revision” has been used to describe how young people with cystic fibrosis attempt to normalise their lives, although the genetic cause of this disease and its impact during childhood distinguishes it from COPD. Morbid obesity, which is caused by lifestyle, may be a parallel health problem that is not an illness. The poorly understood disease trajectory of the frail elderly echoes recent understanding of accelerated lung ageing in smokers, and the biomedical model of decline in lung function, and may resonate best with the disease trajectory of COPD.

Strengths and limitations of study

Our 21 participants may not fully represent the diversity of people with very severe COPD. In particular, none was from an ethnic minority background, although the study cohort encompassed a broad range of demographic, social, clinical, and healthcare backgrounds. All our participants were smokers or ex-smokers, reflecting the profile of COPD in the UK, and it cannot be assumed that their attitudes can be extrapolated to non-smokers. However, the causal link of COPD with lifestyle factors described by our participants encompassed environmental exposure to a broad range of pollutants as well as smoking. Interviewing patients and informal carers together may have resulted in perspectives being modified or withheld; our experienced researcher was aware of this potential problem and could adopt strategies to enable independent voices to be heard. We were aware that researchers’ attitudes influence design, data collection, and analysis of qualitative studies, and used our multidisciplinary professional team and lay advisers to ensure balanced interpretation of the data. In addition, the comments of the delegates at the end of the study workshop added to our understanding of the emerging themes and their practical and policy implications.

Conclusions and policy implications

Our findings challenge current assumptions about models of care and have two important implications for clinicians and policy makers. Firstly, our findings suggest that, in contrast to other conditions, COPD is perceived as “a way of life” rather than an illness that disrupts life. This may underpin acceptance of and adaptation to increasing disability and major health and social needs, in a lifestyle that has become familiar over many years to patients, informal carers, and professional carers. Recognition by healthcare professionals of the risk of “passive acceptance” may enable services to be developed that actively identify and seek to address needs.

Secondly, current models of palliative care for non-malignant disease, adapted from the traditional cancer model, are predicated on an ability to identify “palliative” patients whose end of life care needs should then be assessed and addressed (and who in some systems should eschew curative care). Our data suggest that a point of transition to palliative care is meaningless and impractical in COPD, a condition with no coherent story and an unanticipated end. Linking palliation of symptoms and supportive care to identifying a point of transition thus risks “prognostic paralysis.”

We therefore propose linking holistic assessments of supportive and palliative care needs with milestones throughout the patient’s journey. Suitable milestones might be diagnosis, retirement on medical grounds, starting long term oxygen therapy, hospital admission for an exacerbation of COPD, or (from a clinicians’ perspective) a positive answer to the “surprise” question. The palliative care approach thus becomes progressively integrated with good care of a lifelong progressive disabling condition, with palliative care specialists available to advise on management of intractable symptoms (especially breathlessness). The historically low profile of COPD and its lack of public story is a further barrier to effective provision of supportive care. Voluntary organisations may choose to champion the disease and communicate a story to aid public understanding of this silent, lifelong, progressively disabling condition.

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