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White-haired mourning the dark-haired: The experiences of aged Chinese mothers in facing cancer death of adult child

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Introduction

Up to date for terminal illness and death of adult, spouse and offspring are usually the foci of research as well as clinical practice. It is not uncommon that aged parents in our society are perceived to be requiring "protection" from distressing news like adult children's illness progression and impending death. Confronting with premature cancer death of adult child, motherhood manifests itself and evolves throughout the journey. Such experiences are scarcely studied in the cultural context of Hong Kong.

Objectives

This exploratory study aims at exploring the experiences and needs of aged mothers grieving cancer death of adult child through capturing the firsthand narratives of grieving mothers.

Methodology

Approach of qualitative research was adopted. A purposeful sample of mothers whose children aged from 35 to 55 and died of cancer in palliative care unit of United Christian Hospital three to nine months ago were recruited. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from December 2014 to February 2015 in interviewees' homes. Interview contents were audio-taped and fully transcribed. Thematic analysis was applied in analyzing the generated data.

Result

The unending motherhood intertwined with adherence to filial piety of younger generations, traditional beliefs in Chinese culture and social perceptions of grieving aged mothers. Younger generations' filial obligations to protect elders from intense distress at times clash with elder mothers' strong urge to know and participate. And death-related subjects are still unfavorable and unwelcome in Chinese culture. Avoidance in attending deceased child's funeral and reticence of disclosure to nonfamily are noticeable in the findings. The socially perceived vulnerability in elders facing grief and pre-existing social perception of motherhood in late life subtly influence their experiences of grief. Family-based therapeutic intervention and

culturally tailored support would be beneficial to aged parent, the dying patient and family as a whole. The complexity and ambivalence in news delivery across generations should be recognized and delicately addressed through constructing a platform for family members' voices to be authentically listened and exchanged. An enhanced public awareness on elders' needs to prepare and grieve for offspring's cancer death is called for.