

What they never taught you at medical school

New curriculum offers online information on helping with distress, depression and more

→ Marc Beishon

Interest in addressing cancer patients' emotional and psychological needs is far outstripping access to training all over the world. Now the International Psycho-Oncology Society and the European School of Oncology have clubbed together to fill the gap.

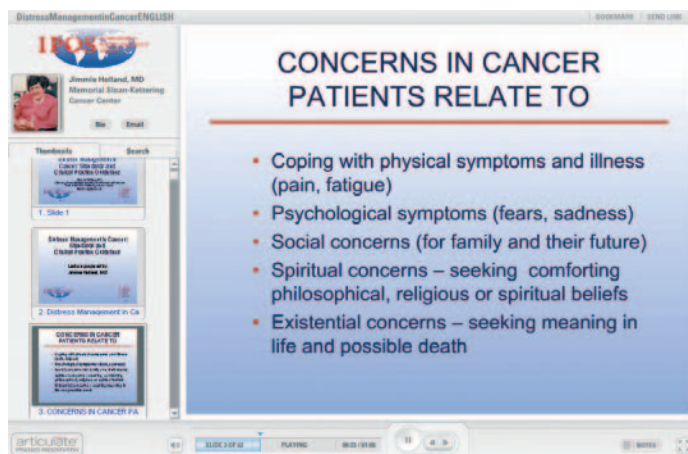
Psycho-oncology has been around for 30 years, but it is not yet established as a formal oncology or psychiatric speciality to the extent that standard, national training programmes exist, even in developed countries. While most major cancer centres do have a psycho-oncology unit – although not necessarily termed as such – there is great variation in the resources and approaches to hand. General hospitals and other parts of healthcare systems may have little to offer.

As Luigi Grassi, president of the International Psycho-Oncology Society (IPOS), comments, it is a fast moving discipline that is proving difficult to 'pin down'. Some consider it a true oncology specialty, but others see it as classical 'consultation-liaison' psychiatry (now known also as psychosomatic medicine – the interface between other medical specialties and psychiatry).

Then there is the wide spectrum of those other specialties it involves. Apart from oncology and psychiatry, there is of course clinical psychology, other social sciences and nursing, and general and palliative medicine.

As Grassi, whose 'day job' is professor of psychiatry at the University of Ferrara, Italy, adds, today's psycho-oncology now extends to all aspects of cancer, from prevention (such as screening campaigns and changing lifestyles), to a wide spectrum of psychosocial morbidity during diagnosis and treatment, to quality of life and end-of-life care, plus topics such as patient–doctor communications. "We have seen a tremendous increase in psycho-oncology research and training programmes in recent years, and it has become a model for intervening in other severe conditions such as heart disease and multiple sclerosis," he says. "But while there are some special fellowships and masters courses in psycho-oncology, no country yet has a specific national residency programme."

One of the goals of IPOS, says Grassi, is to encourage the development of core psycho-oncology curricula at a national level, building on current provision at places such as Ferrara and several other Italian universities, where medical students receive 20 hours training in psycho-oncology as part of their psychiatry module, with workshops and training for oncology and surgical residents.



Your window on psycho-oncology. This online lecture on distress management was prepared by Jimmie Holland, one of the pioneers of psycho-oncology. Holland narrates the English-language version, but it can also be listened to in French, German Hungarian, Italian and Spanish, with Japanese, Portuguese, Arabic and Chinese versions set to come online in the coming year

Italy also has at least four masters programmes in psycho-oncology, and there are training curricula in other countries. In Germany, for instance, training is organised by the country's two psycho-oncology societies, and is supported by charitable donations; 900 professionals have been put through basic and advanced courses in 10 years. The US – where psycho-oncology started – now has many and varied postgraduate training opportunities.

But while IPOS continues to lobby for such initiatives to be formally and widely supported, via its network of country societies and members, the organisation has decided not to wait, and recently it launched its own online core curriculum in psycho-oncology. The aim is to bring the latest knowledge from top psycho-oncology experts to a worldwide audience, and it has the obvious benefit of bringing training to healthcare professionals in countries and regions where national provision may not be available for some time.

Funded initially as a five-year project by the European School of Oncology (ESO), the IPOS programme is billed as 'a core curriculum in psychosocial aspects of cancer care'. It comprises a set of online lectures written by experts and delivered by narration and slides. The first set of five lectures went online in 2006, and another six are in preparation.

The first lectures cover some of the most pressing psycho-oncology topics, such as distress management, depression, and communication

and interpersonal skills in cancer care. According to Christoffer Johansen, immediate past-president of IPOS and head of psychosocial cancer research at the Institute of Cancer Epidemiology in Denmark, the expert contributors who have both written and narrated the lectures are a real pull – in particular, he mentions Jimmie Holland of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, author of the distress management lecture, who is the pioneer of psycho-oncology and founding president of IPOS. Says Johansen: "We may have selected an old fashioned format – the lecture – but it's a model that can deliver a lot of information in a short time, in a format accessible to everyone."

Grassi, who has been involved in drawing together the content, says there are several important aspects of the programme. The most obvious is that each lecture has been translated into several languages from English. So far, most of the lectures are available in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Hungarian, and Grassi says, "We have a Japanese version coming soon and people are working on Portuguese, Arabic and Chinese too – just imagine how many more professionals that can involve."

While there are other online materials, in particular a number of presentations on the website of the American Psychosocial Oncology Society (APOS), Grassi emphasises that the IPOS curriculum has been designed as an integrated set of lectures with a commitment to update the material as developments take place, such as the

“It’s a model that can deliver a lot of information in a short time, in a format accessible to everyone”

introduction of new drug treatments. Furthermore, each language translation has been assessed for quality and cultural factors by experts nominated by ESO. “Other lectures on the web may just be presentations taken from meetings, and are simply not part of an updatable curriculum,” he points out.

Each lecture has an online evaluation form, from which IPOS has gathered an impressive volume of feedback. “We have had more than a thousand responses so far, and the indications are that the quality of the lectures is high,” says Johansen. “However, we do need to put more thought into how people fill in the evaluation, as it is taking too long at present.”

Of 995 evaluations received as of last October, the biggest professional grouping was 175 psychologists (21%), followed by patient advocates (11%), nurses (6%), and oncologists (4%). Quite a few other professions also took part, such as counsellor, psychiatrist, grief therapist and social worker. But there seems to be more information that can be gleaned about who wants the training, as 345 (42%) were ‘others’. Of the 995 respondents, 55% worked in a clinical setting, 37% in ‘other’ settings, 7% in science and 5% in industry.

Maggie Watson, consultant clinical psychologist at the Royal Marsden Hospital in the UK, and an IPOS board member, feels the curriculum has achieved its aim to provide desktop teaching, and “consolidates current opinion into a single lecture for each topic, providing important overviews.” She adds, “Many different professionals can access information on a discipline that is essentially multi-disciplinary” – which certainly seems to be the case judging by the mix of participants so far.

A core aim is to increase access to professionals worldwide, especially those in developing countries. And as Johansen adds, the curriculum could also play an important part in

helping to reach decision-makers who may be able to unlock more funds for vital psycho-oncology services.

Awareness around this issue does seem to be growing. IPOS had a record attendance of 1,350 people from 58 countries at its world congress in Venice last year, and it is busy forging links and holding joint symposia with other oncology societies. Johansen says that, thanks to IPOS involvement, the World Health Organization is including psychosocial aspects of care in its cancer control work for the first time (see *Cancer control: knowledge into action, WHO guide for effective programmes*, at www.who.int).

“If we are going to get psycho-oncology onto the everyday agenda of hospitals, we have to get to the heart of the political issues involved in changing the treatment protocols for patients,” says Johansen – not least the world population of 25 million cancer survivors and rising that health policy makers now need to take into account.

THE CORE CURRICULUM

The lectures presently available on the IPOS and ESO websites (www.ipos-society.org and www.cancer-world.org) are:

- Communication and interpersonal skills
 - Anxiety and adjustment
 - Distress management
 - Depression and depressive disorders
 - Psychosocial assessment
- This year, the following topics will be added:
- Family and partner issues
 - Palliative care
 - Grief and bereavement
 - Psychological intervention
 - Psycho-pharmacology
 - Ethical aspects