
Haptotherapy for patients with cancer: the impact of affective touch

Agnes Van Swaay*^{†1}, Kris Vissers¹, Yvonne Engels¹, and Marieke Groot²

¹Radboud University Medical Center, Anesthesiology, Pain and Palliative Care – Netherlands

²Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences – Netherlands

Abstract

Background: Several well-known psychotherapies are (also) applied to patients with cancer. However, the question is whether sufficient attention is paid to the shifts in the way patients perceive their altered and damaged body, and to their emotional impact. The connection between these two is precisely the core issue of haptotherapy for patients with cancer.

Objective: Patients with cancer who had haptotherapy during their disease and recovery trajectory gave high value scores to haptotherapy. However, it is unknown in what way the different components of haptotherapy contribute to such positive outcomes. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to come to a detailed description of the haptotherapeutic treatment of patients with cancer, and obtain insight in experiences, perceptions and opinions of patients and haptotherapists about content, efficacy and value of haptotherapy.

Methods: Qualitative in-depth interviews with patients with cancer and haptotherapists; thematic content analysis to analyze the data.

Results: Fourteen patients and nine haptotherapists were interviewed. The combination of conversation and affective touch was unanimously considered crucial. Patients mentioned that being touched by the haptotherapist specifically triggered the awareness that they lost the connection with (parts of) their body. Moreover, haptotherapists emphasized the importance of affective touch to help patients to (re)incorporate the affected – and accordingly neglected – parts of, or even their entire body.

Conclusion: This qualitative study shows that haptotherapy has the potential to help patients becoming aware of and restoring their connection with their body, including the affected and neglected parts, which is assumed to facilitate emotional processing.

Keywords: Haptotherapy, Affective Touch, Cancer, (Psycho)Oncology, Qualitative Research

*Speaker

[†]Corresponding author: Agnes.vanSwaaij@radboudumc.nl