AFTER LIFE BELIEF MAY ASSUAGE FEAR OF DEATH IN HOME CARE OF ELDERS IN JAPAN

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Abstract - Japan's superannuated population soon faces an unprecedented wave of mortality. While 80% of Japanese died at home in the 1960's, now roughly 80% die in hospitals. As the annual death toll rises over the coming years, hospitals can no longer provide space for everyone to die, so Japan's Ministry of Health urges that families care for dying elders at home. However, many families are psychologically and spiritually ill-prepared to face the death of their elders. Hypothesizing that afterlife belief would alleviate some of the stress and grief involved in watching a loved one pass on, we interviewed a 70-ish woman caregiver who cared for her husband with liver cancer for five years before he passed, but believes that her husband's spirit continues after his death. Our semi- structured interview asked how they sought information about terminal care; physical and psychological changes in both caregiver and patient; and patient's and caregiver's attitudes toward death. Content analysis of the interview transcript revealed three major themes, viz.: hospitals will not admit patients for diagnostic checks without treatment, the patient blamed himself for getting cancer, and the belief in afterlife assuaged the fear of death. These results suggest not only that doctors need to respect patients' and families' rights to reject aggressive treatment, but also that their beliefs in afterlife may help them face death and bereavement.