

Perceptions and beliefs of lay people from northern Uganda regarding surgery for diagnosis and treatment of cervical cancer

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Abstract

Objective

To explore perceptions and beliefs of people in a rural community in northern Uganda regarding surgery for the diagnosis and treatment of cervical cancer. The aim of the study was to inform interventions to reduce delay and improve timely diagnosis and prompt appropriate treatments for patients with symptoms of cervical cancer.

Methods

A semi-structured study guide informed by Kleinman's explanatory model for illness was used to collect data during 24 focus group discussions involving 175 men and women aged 18 to 59 years in Gulu, northern Uganda. Using thematic analysis, themes and subthemes were identified from the data through an iterative process and consensus among the authors.

Results

Surgery for diagnosis and management of cervical cancer was perceived as (1) appropriate when performed at early stage of cancer and by senior doctors, but (2) a potential catalyst for the spread of cancer and early death; and (3) a challenge to childbearing and motherhood as well as a source of distress to women and families if surgery involved removal of the uterus with subsequent permanent infertility.

Conclusions

There are some negative perceptions about surgery for cervical cancer that may deter prompt help-seeking for symptoms. However, targeted messages for public awareness interventions to promote help-seeking can be built on the positive perceptions and beliefs that surgery could be curative when undertaken for early-stage cancer and by skilled doctors.

Key words: Beliefs, Cancer, Cervical cancer, Help-seeking, Metastasis, Oncology.