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Palliative Care in the 21st Century: Multidisciplinary Collaboration, Digital Health, and Equitable Access

Tamriko Bulia[1], Tina Beruchashvili[1], Ioseb Abesadze[2], Ekaterine Abzianidze[3], Bakho Dvali[4] Lela Inaishvili[1]

[1]School of Health Sciences, the University of Georgia; [2]Tbilisi State Medical University; [3]East European University; [4] New Vision University

Abstract

Background: Palliative care is a fundamental component of modern healthcare, aiming to improve the quality of life for patients with serious, life-limiting illnesses and their families. Despite global recognition of its importance, access remains limited, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, highlighting systemic, structural, and workforce-related disparities.

Objective: This review provides a comprehensive analysis of contemporary palliative care, emphasizing multidisciplinary collaboration, workforce development, digital innovation, ethical considerations, and strategies for equitable global access.

Methods: A narrative synthesis of recent literature was conducted, focusing on international guidelines, empirical studies, and evidence-based interventions. Key themes included holistic patient-centered approaches, interdisciplinary teamwork, public education, digital health applications, caregiver involvement, and economic and ethical frameworks supporting palliative care delivery.

Results: Effective palliative care requires early integration alongside disease-directed treatments, robust multidisciplinary teams—including physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and spiritual care providers—and structured workforce education. Digital innovations, such as telepalliative care, electronic patient-reported outcomes, and mHealth applications, expand access, enhance continuity of care, and empower patients and caregivers. Engagement of family caregivers improves symptom management and overall patient outcomes. Ethical frameworks and culturally sensitive practices are essential for aligning care with patient values, reducing professional moral distress, and addressing global disparities. Economic analyses demonstrate that timely, home- and community-based interventions reduce unnecessary hospitalizations and optimize healthcare resources.

Conclusion: Modern palliative care is defined by the integration of clinical excellence, interdisciplinary collaboration, digital innovation, and ethical, culturally sensitive frameworks. Achieving equitable access worldwide requires coordinated policy efforts, workforce capacity-building, and the adaptation of services to diverse contexts. Early, patient- and family-centered palliative interventions improve clinical outcomes, enhance quality of life, and ensure that individuals facing life-limiting illnesses receive compassionate, comprehensive, and culturally competent care globally.

Keywords: palliative care, multidisciplinary teamwork, digital health, equitable access, patient-centered care, workforce development, global health

Introduction and global context of Palliative Care

Palliative care is increasingly seen as an essential part of healthcare, based on a holistic, patient-centered approach. Its main goal goes beyond easing physical symptoms to include psychological, social, and spiritual support, ultimately improving the quality of life for patients and their families. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), palliative care is “an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the challenges associated with life-threatening illness, whether physical, psychological, social, or spiritual” (WHO, 2020). Each year, about 56.8 million people worldwide need palliative care, including 25.7 million in their last year of life; however, only around 14% receive these services. Despite recognizing its importance globally, access to palliative care remains limited, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where disparities are greatest (Sleeman et al., 2021). The 2014 WHO resolution (WHA 67.19) highlighted the need for equitable access to palliative care, yet a decade later, most patients in need still lack services. Palliative care is a basic human right, guaranteeing respectful, high-quality, and personalized care. Its success depends on teamwork across disciplines, effective communication with families, and raising societal awareness. Evidence shows that starting palliative care early improves symptom control, boosts quality of life, reduces unnecessary hospital stays, and better uses healthcare resources.

Global aging populations and the increasing prevalence of chronic non-communicable diseases highlight the growing importance of palliative care. In 2020, the number of people aged 60 and over reached 1 billion and is expected to rise to 2.1 billion by 2050, with those aged 80 and over projected to triple to 426 million (WHO, 2020). About 69% of individuals in need of palliative care are over 60 (Global Atlas of Palliative Care, 2nd edition). However, only 12% of the global population currently has access to essential services, emphasizing the need for health system changes (Sleeman et al., 2021). These demographic changes underscore the link between aging, chronic disease, and palliative care needs, calling for culturally tailored interventions, international cooperation, and technology to improve equitable access (Weiss et al., 2025).

Core Principles and Implementation of Palliative Care

Palliative care is fundamentally based on principles that emphasize human dignity, interdisciplinary teamwork, and community involvement. Recognizing palliative care as a basic human right ensures that individuals with serious, life-limiting illnesses gain access to timely, safe, and high-quality care. This approach focuses not only on symptom management but also on comprehensive attention to psychosocial, emotional, and spiritual well-being, recognizing that patients' experiences of illness go beyond the physical aspects (Choo et al., 2023; Dionne Odom, Ornstein, & Kent, 2019).

Interdisciplinary teamwork is vital for effective palliative care. Healthcare providers such as physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, rehabilitation specialists, and spiritual care providers must work together to create personalized care plans. Evidence shows that this teamwork improves symptom control, reduces disorganized care, and boosts satisfaction for patients and caregivers (McIlfatrick et al., 2021; Kaasa et al., 2018). Multidisciplinary teams also enable quick communication across different care environments, making sure important information about patient preferences, medical conditions, and psychosocial needs is always shared. This prevents gaps in care and supports better continuity.

Public awareness and education are essential for encouraging early involvement with palliative services. Misconceptions that equate palliative care solely with impending death often cause delays in referral and limit access to supportive care. Targeted awareness campaigns aimed at the general public, healthcare providers, and policymakers can reduce stigma, improve understanding of care options, and empower patients and families to participate in decisions (Dionne Odom, Ornstein, & Kent, 2019; McIlfatrick et al., 2021). Evidence indicates that public education efforts increase the use of palliative services, support advance care planning, and help ensure treatment aligns with patient values.

High-quality palliative care implementation also requires a clear definition of service scope, integration of patient and family priorities, and utilization of evidence-based multidisciplinary interventions. Early involvement of palliative care teams alongside disease-directed treatments has been shown to improve symptom control, decrease unnecessary hospitalizations and invasive procedures, and enhance healthcare resource utilization (Kaasa et al., 2018; Hui et al., 2016). Ambulatory and home-based services are preferred by most patients and are linked to better continuity of care, improved management of physical and psychological symptoms, and higher patient satisfaction (Hui et al., 2016; Sanders et al., 2024).

Effective service delivery relies not only on clinical interventions but also on system-level organization. Coordinated referral pathways, integrated electronic health records, and standardized protocols facilitate timely access to care, support proactive symptom monitoring, and improve communication among multidisciplinary teams. Health system support, including sufficient staffing, structured training, and policy frameworks, is crucial for maintaining high-quality palliative care (Knaul et al., 2021; Connor & Bermedo, 2020). Without strong organizational structures, even evidence-based interventions may fail to reach patients in need, especially in resource-limited settings.

Furthermore, the implementation of palliative care must be responsive to the changing needs of patients and their families. Regularly assessing patient-reported outcomes, caregiver feedback, and clinical indicators enables ongoing improvement and adaptation of services (Hui & Bruera, 2016; Li, Chhabra, & Singh, 2021). This feedback-focused approach ensures that care stays aligned with individual values and circumstances, supporting patient autonomy and fostering resilience within families.

Ethical principles form the foundation of all aspects of palliative care practice. Respect for patient autonomy, cultural sensitivity, and informed consent are essential for providing care that is both effective and ethically right (Rid, Wendler, & Mattson, 2023). Multidisciplinary teams must navigate complex ethical choices, balancing symptom relief, patient preferences, and resource allocation while ensuring transparency and trust (Sudore, Landefeld, & Knight, 2017). By integrating clinical, ethical, and societal considerations, palliative care ultimately aims to improve quality of life and preserve dignity for patients and their families across different care settings.

Workforce, Education, and Digital Innovation

High-quality palliative care fundamentally depends on a well-trained, competent, and continuously educated workforce. The complexity of patient needs—including physical symptom management, psychosocial support, and spiritual care—requires healthcare professionals to have not only clinical expertise but also skills in communication, ethics, and interprofessional collaboration (Li, Chhabra, & Singh, 2021; Hayek et al., 2025). However, a lack of knowledge among medical and allied health staff remains a major barrier to early and effective palliative care integration. Misconceptions that palliative care is only for end-of-life stages or that it may conflict with curative treatments often cause delays in referral, leading to unnecessary patient suffering (Dalgaard et al., 2014; Zhi & Smith, 2015).

Structured palliative care education (PCE) programs aimed at healthcare professionals, caregivers, and the public are crucial for overcoming these barriers. Training should include modules on symptom assessment, communication skills, psychosocial interventions, and cultural competence, ensuring all team members can address the multidimensional needs of patients (Li, Chhabra, & Singh, 2021). Evidence indicates that standardized education and competency-based curricula improve integration across clinical specialties, enhance patient outcomes, and promote more efficient use of resources (Hayek et al., 2025). Additionally, incorporating training on ethical decision-making, advance care planning, and caregiver support further boosts workforce capacity and aligns practice with established standards.

Digital innovation has become a transformative force in palliative care, expanding access, improving service efficiency, and supporting patient-centered care (Weiss et al., 2025; Bush, Perez, Baum, & Nair, 2023). Telepalliative care platforms facilitate real-time consultations, remote symptom monitoring, and collaborative decision-making among patients, families, and multidisciplinary teams, especially in areas that are geographically underserved or have limited resources (Hui & Bruera, 2016). Studies show that telepalliative interventions decrease emergency department visits, improve continuity of care, and increase satisfaction for both patients and caregivers (Bush et al., 2023).

Electronic patient-reported outcomes (ePROs) are equally transformative, enabling ongoing, systematic assessment of pain, fatigue, psychosocial distress, and functional decline. Incorporating ePROs into clinical workflows supports proactive management, early intervention, and more efficient allocation of healthcare resources (Hui & Bruera, 2016; Weiss et al., 2025). Mobile health (mHealth) applications, wearable devices, and digital self-management tools further empower patients and caregivers by facilitating symptom tracking, medication adherence, advanced care planning, and psychosocial support (Barnestein-Fonseca et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021). By integrating digital monitoring with personalized feedback, these tools boost patient engagement, foster self-efficacy, and enhance adherence to care plans, ultimately leading to better health outcomes.

The integration of workforce development and digital innovation produces synergistic effects. A digitally literate workforce, trained in telehealth, ePRO interpretation, and virtual communication, can expand the reach of palliative services while maintaining high standards of care (Weiss et al., 2025). Ongoing professional development programs that include simulation, virtual training, and interprofessional case-based learning ensure that staff are prepared to handle both technological and clinical complexities. Additionally, data generated through digital tools can inform health system planning, identify unmet needs, and guide resource allocation to high-priority populations (Li et al., 2021).

Importantly, the use of digital health in palliative care must be fair and culturally appropriate. Technological solutions should be created to overcome barriers like limited digital literacy, lack of access to devices, and regional infrastructure gaps (Barnestein-Fonseca et al., 2024; Weiss et al., 2025). Targeted efforts for older adults, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, and rural communities are crucial to prevent worsening existing health disparities. Policies and workforce training should therefore include principles of inclusion, accessibility, and patient-centered design to make sure that technological advancements lead to real improvements in care quality.

Ultimately, the combination of a highly skilled, continuously educated workforce with thoughtfully implemented digital health innovations positions palliative care to meet modern demands. This integrated approach allows for timely, patient-centered, and equitable care delivery, improves clinical outcomes, reduces healthcare system burdens, and empowers patients and caregivers to actively participate in managing serious illnesses (Li, Chhabra, & Singh, 2021; Bush et al., 2023; Weiss et al., 2025).

Ethics, Family Support, Economics, and Global Equity

Ethical and legal frameworks form the foundation of modern palliative care, guiding challenging clinical decisions, protecting patient autonomy, and ensuring fair access to quality services. Clinicians must navigate a range of sensitive ethical issues, including informed consent, shared decision-making, advance directives, withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining treatments, and weighing the potential benefits and burdens of medical interventions (Rid et al., 2023; Downar & Rodrigues, 2021). Evidence shows that early and structured discussions about goals of care are linked to increased patient satisfaction, fewer unnecessary or invasive procedures, less moral distress among healthcare professionals, and better alignment of treatment plans with patients' personal values and preferences (Sudore et al., 2017). Ethical considerations in palliative care go beyond individual patients to include societal responsibilities, such as fair resource allocation, culturally sensitive care, and attention to vulnerable populations often marginalized within health systems.

Family and informal caregivers are vital pillars of palliative care, often taking on diverse roles that include direct clinical support as well as emotional, social, and logistical help (Sudore et al., 2017). Effective palliative care systems see caregivers as essential partners, involving them actively in decision-making, care planning, and symptom control. Research indicates that caregiver involvement leads to better patient outcomes, improved care continuity, and earlier detection of worsening symptoms (Barnestein-Fonseca et al., 2024; Weiss et al., 2025). However, caregivers face significant risks such as physical exhaustion, psychological stress, financial hardship, and social isolation, especially when support services are lacking. To address these issues, programs should provide structured education, psychosocial support, respite care, peer networks, and digital tools that facilitate remote assistance and monitoring (Barnestein-Fonseca et al., 2024; Weiss et al., 2025).

Economic evaluation of palliative care consistently shows that timely, well-coordinated interventions cut healthcare costs by reducing unnecessary hospital stays, shortening length of stay, and avoiding ineffective or non-beneficial treatments (May et al., 2020). Cost-effectiveness is further improved through home-based and community-focused care models, which foster continuity, decrease reliance on acute-care facilities, and increase patient and caregiver satisfaction (Smith et al., 2022). Analyses of health system performance reveal that investing in palliative care not only produces direct cost savings but also enhances overall system efficiency, allowing for the redistribution of limited resources to high-priority populations (Knaul et al., 2018; Connor & Bermedo, 2020).

Global inequities in access to palliative care remain significant. Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) receive a disproportionately small share of services, despite bearing a substantial burden of life-limiting illnesses (Sleeman et al., 2019; Rajagopal & Kumar, 2022). Structural barriers—including workforce shortages, inadequate policy frameworks, limited availability of essential medications, and socio-cultural factors—exacerbate these disparities. Addressing these issues requires coordinated global efforts, including policy reform, targeted workforce development, capacity-building programs, and the adoption of contextually suitable digital health innovations (Cherny et al., 2023; Weiss et al., 2025).

Equity-focused strategies must incorporate culturally sensitive care, respect for local values, and inclusivity in decision-making. Evidence highlights the importance of community engagement, local leadership, and partnerships with non-governmental organizations to adapt palliative services to the needs of diverse populations, especially in resource-limited settings (Connor & Bermedo, 2020). Digital platforms, telepalliative care, and mHealth interventions provide promising solutions for closing gaps in service delivery, supporting both patients and caregivers, and expanding reach without sacrificing quality (Weiss et al., 2025; Barnestein-Fonseca et al., 2024). Ultimately, ethically grounded, economically informed, and equity-driven approaches are fundamental to sustainable palliative care. By addressing patient autonomy, caregiver well-being, health system efficiency, and global disparities simultaneously, palliative care can fulfill its main goal: delivering timely, high-quality, culturally competent, and accessible services to all individuals facing life-limiting illnesses, while protecting dignity and quality of life for patients and families worldwide (Rid et al., 2023; Cherny et al., 2023;).

Discussion

This comprehensive review highlights the changing landscape of palliative care, focusing on the intersection of demographic changes, workforce capacity, technological progress, ethical issues, and global fairness. The increasing prevalence of chronic and life-limiting illnesses—especially among aging populations—underscores the urgent need for timely and integrated palliative services worldwide (WHO, 2020; Sleeman et al., 2021). Despite recognizing palliative care as a basic human right, significant gaps still exist in service availability, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, reflecting systemic, structural, and resource-related disparities (Knaul et al., 2018; Rajagopal & Kumar, 2022).

Effective palliative care depends on clear core principles, including interdisciplinary teamwork, patient- and family-centered methods, and increasing public awareness. Multidisciplinary teams improve symptom control, reduce care gaps, and support coordinated decision-making across healthcare settings (McIlfatrick et al., 2021; Kaasa et al., 2018). Early inclusion alongside disease-specific treatments has consistently been linked to better clinical results, fewer unnecessary hospital stays, and more efficient use of resources (Hui et al., 2016; Kaasa et al., 2018). Public and professional education is essential to dispel misconceptions that limit palliative care to end-of-life situations, emphasizing the need for targeted awareness efforts that encourage proactive involvement and future care planning (Dionne Odom, Ornstein, & Kent, 2019).

A highly skilled, continuously trained workforce forms the foundation of effective palliative care. Evidence supports structured education programs that cover clinical skills, psychosocial support, ethical decision-making, and caregiver involvement, thereby improving both patient outcomes and system efficiency (Li, Chhabra, & Singh, 2021; Hayek et al., 2025). Digital innovation—especially telepalliative care, electronic patient-reported outcomes, and mobile health tools—broadens the reach of palliative services, enhances continuity of care, and empowers patients and families while aiding data-driven health system planning (Weiss et al., 2025; Bush et al., 2023). Importantly, digital solutions should be implemented fairly, with attention to cultural sensitivity, accessibility, and efforts to reduce disparities affecting older adults and underserved groups (Barnestein-Fonseca et al., 2024).

Ethical, legal, and societal considerations are central to modern palliative care. Organized discussions about goals of care, advance directives, and treatment preferences help align clinical actions with patient values, reduce moral distress among healthcare professionals, and increase overall satisfaction (Sudore et al., 2017; Rid et al., 2023). Family caregivers are essential, providing both practical and emotional support. Effective systems actively involve caregivers in care planning and decision-making while also offering psychosocial support, respite services, and digital tools to prevent burnout. Economic studies show that prompt palliative care reduces unnecessary hospital stays, shortens length of stay, and enhances cost-efficiency, especially when care is provided at home or in community settings.

Finally, global disparities remain a major challenge. Although LMICs bear a disproportionate burden of serious illness, access to palliative services is limited by workforce shortages, weak policy frameworks, and cultural barriers (Sleeman et al., 2019). Achieving fair and sustainable palliative care requires coordinated international efforts, including policy reform, focused workforce development, digital innovations suited to specific contexts, and culturally adapted care models (Connor & Bermedo, 2020; Cherny et al., 2023). Incorporating these elements enables healthcare systems to provide timely, high-quality, and culturally sensitive palliative care, ensuring dignity and better quality of life for patients and families worldwide.

Conclusion

Palliative care has become a vital part of modern healthcare, representing a holistic, patient- and family-focused approach that goes beyond merely managing symptoms to include psychological, social, and spiritual well-being. This review highlights that, although palliative care is recognized as a fundamental human right, significant disparities persist worldwide, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where structural, resource, and workforce shortages delay access. Evidence consistently shows that early and integrated palliative interventions—supported by interdisciplinary teamwork, workforce training, public education, and digital solutions—improve clinical outcomes, better use resources, and enhance the quality of life for patients and their caregivers.

The synergy between a highly skilled, continuously trained workforce and carefully implemented digital health solutions positions palliative care to address the complex needs of aging populations and the rising burden of chronic, life-limiting illnesses. Ethical and culturally sensitive frameworks, along with strong caregiver engagement, further ensure that care stays aligned with patient values while reducing professional moral distress and caregiver burden. Economic analyses show that investing in home- and community-based palliative services not only decreases unnecessary hospitalizations but also enhances overall health system efficiency.

Looking ahead, the sustainable and fair growth of palliative care depends on coordinated global strategies that include policy reforms, adaptable service models suited to different contexts, capacity-building efforts, and culturally aware digital innovations. By integrating these elements, healthcare systems can provide timely, high-quality, and universally accessible palliative care, protecting patients' and their families' dignity, autonomy, and quality of life worldwide. The combination of clinical excellence, ethical standards, technological advancements, and global fairness shapes the future of palliative care, ensuring that no one facing a life-limiting illness is left without compassionate, comprehensive support.

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პალიატიური მზრუნველობა XXI საუკუნეში: მულტიდისციპლინური მიდგომა, ციფრული ჯანმრთელობა და თანაბარი ხელმისაწვდომობა

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მიზანი: ჩვენი მიმოხილვა უზრუნველყოფს გაფართოებულ ანალიზს და ხაზს უსვამს ინტერდისციპლინური თანამშრომლობის გაძლიერებას, განათლების გაუმჯობესებას, ციფრული ტექნოლოგიებისა და ინოვაციების დანერგვას, ეთიკური საკითხების გათვლისწინებას და გლობალური, სამართლიანი ხელმისაწვდომობის სტრატეგიების უზრუნველყოფას.

მეთოდები: ჩვენს მიერ ჩატარებული ლიტერატურის მიმოხილვა ორიენტირებული იყო საერთაშორისო რეკომენდაციებსა და სამეცნიერო კვლევებზე. მიმოხილვის დროს ძირითადი აქცენტი გაკეთდა პაცინტზე ორიენტირებულ, ჰოლისტიკურ მიდგომაზე, მულტიდისციპლინური მიდგომის მნიშვნელობაზე, სამედიცინო პერსონალის განათლების მნიშვნელობაზე,ციფრული ჯანდაცვის ტექნოლოგიებზე და მათ მნიშვნელობაზე, ასევე იმ სოციალურ-ეკონომიკურ ჩარჩოებზე, რომლებიც მხარს უჭერენ პალიატიურ მზრუნველობას.

შედეგები: ეფექტური პალიატიური მზრუნველობა მოიაზრებს მულტიდისციპლინური გუნდის ჩართვას ქრონიკული ინკურაბელური დაავადების დადგენის მომენტიდან. მულტიდისციპლინურ გუნდში გულისხმება ექიმის, ექთნის, ფსიქოლოგის, სოციალური მუშაკის და სასულიერო პირის არსებობა. ციფრული ინოვაციები, როგორიცაა ტელეპალიატიური მზრუნველობა ზრდის ხელმისაწვდომობას და ზრუნვის ეფექტურობას. ეთიკური ნორმების დაცვა და პაციენტზე ორიენტირებული მიდგომა ამცირებს დაავადებით განპირბებულ სერიოზულ ტანჯვას, სტრესს და ამცირებს ჰოსპიტალიზაციის რისკს.

დასკვნა: თანამედროვე პალიატიური მზრუნველობა მოიაზრებს მულტიდისციპლინური და ინტერდისციპლინურ მიდგომას, ციფრული ინოვაციებისა და ეთიკური ჩარჩოების ინტეგრაციას. მსოფლიო მასშტაბით თანაბარი ხელმისაწვდომობის უზრუნველყოფა კი მოითხოვს პოლიტიკის ცვლილებას რატა ზრუნვა გახდეს პლანეტაზე ყველასთვის თანაბარი. ადრეული, პაციენტზე და მისი ოჯახის წევრებზე ორიენტირებული პალიატიური მზრუნველობა აუმჯობესებს არა მხოლოდ სიმპტომთა მართვას და კლინიკურ შედეგებს, არამედ ასევე აუმჯობესებს მათი ცხოვრეების ხარისხს.