Public Perceptions of Death

Headline findings from a ComRes survey of the public conducted on behalf of Marie Curie Cancer Care

Personal experience of caring for someone who is at the end of their life appears to exacerbate, rather than alleviate people’s concerns about getting the help that they need when they are at the end of their lives. Less than half (47%) of people in the UK say that they are confident that if they or someone close to them were terminally ill, the NHS would provide them with a high quality of care. People in London appear to be the most critical of the quality of end of life care that their loved one received and are the most concerned about their own end of life care. People in the North of England and Northern Ireland by contrast are particularly likely to say that the quality of care that their loved one received was good.

Personal experience of end of life care

- More than two in five (44%) of people in the UK know someone who have died in the last three years.
- Thinking about different kinds of hands-on support, those who know someone who has died in the last three years are most likely to have supported that person by providing emotional support (59%). A third (34%) say that they provided practical support around the house (e.g. housework, food shopping) and less than a quarter (23%) say that they provided practical care (e.g. helping them out of bed, feeding them, liaising with healthcare professionals). One in seven (14%) say that they provided financial support (e.g. helping them manage their finances). A third (32%) provided none of these.
- People in the UK who have lost someone close to them in the last three years tend to agree that it was fairly easy (45%) for that person to access the support that they needed. However, only one in seven (14%) say that it was very easy and a quarter (26%) of people who know someone who has died in the last three years say that it was difficult to access the required support.
  - People in London (31%) and the South East of England (30%) are particularly likely to say that it was difficult to access the required support while people in the North West of England (68%) are particularly likely to say that it was easy.

Quality of end of life care

- People who know someone who has died are generally positive about the quality of care that their loved one received at the end of their life – 68% of people say that the quality of care and support that they received from local services was either very or fairly good. However, a notable 18% say that it was poor.
  - People in London (24%) and the West Midlands (22%) who know someone who has died are more likely from people in other regions across the UK to say that the quality of care for their loved one was poor. Indeed, 15% of people in London say that the quality of care was very poor, compared to only 5% across the UK as a whole.
  - People in Northern Ireland (73%) and the North East of England (73%) are particularly likely to say that the quality of care was good.
  - While people who know someone who has died tend to think that the quality of care that people received from local services was good (68%), they appear to think that they support they received from family and friends was better (73% say that his was good).
Personal experience of supporting someone who was at the end of their life appears to have exacerbated, rather than alleviated people’s concerns about getting the help that they need when they are at the end of their lives. People are more likely to say that their experience of someone they know dying has either made them more concerned (45%) about getting the help that they need or it has made no difference to their views (41%) than say that it has made them less concerned (8%). However, they are more likely than those with no recent experience of death to feel confident that medical and nursing support would be readily available were they terminally ill (62% versus 57%).

- Of those that have recent experience of someone close to them dying, women are more likely than men to say that this has made them concerned about their own end of life care (50% and 41% respectively).
- Those who are middle aged appear to be more concerned than younger and elderly people (53% of 35 – 44 year olds and 52% of 45 – 54 year olds say that they are concerned compared to 41% of over 65s and 33% of 18 – 24 year olds).
- Those in London (54%) and Scotland (56%) who know someone who has died are more likely than people in other regions of the UK to say that it has made them more concerned. Indeed, one in three (32%) people in London say that it has made them a lot more concerned about getting the support they need.

Priorities for end of life care – all respondents

- When thinking about the standard of care that they would like to receive if they were terminally ill:
  - A quarter (25%) of people in the UK as a whole say that ‘being kept pain free’ is most important to them.
  - A similar proportion (20%) of people say that ‘having my friends and family around me’ is most important to them when thinking about their own priorities for their end of life care.
  - ‘Being cared for in the place of my choice’ when at the end of their life is the most important consideration for 15% of people. This is particularly true of older people - 19% of 55 – 64 year olds and 18% of over 65s say that it is most important to them.
  - Priorities for end of life are consistent between those who have and have not had someone close to them die in the last three years.
- While only 17% of people say that ‘having medical and nursing support readily available’ is most important to them when thinking about the quality and standard of care that they would like to receive if they were terminally ill, for 59% of people, this is one of their top three priorities for end of life care.
- When asked why ‘being cared for in the place of their choice’ was most important to them, most older people said that this was because they would like to be somewhere familiar like their own home in their final days. Older people are also likely to explain their reasoning by saying that they want to make the choice about where they play out the end of their life and do not want someone else, like a doctor, to make the choice for them.
- People are broadly confident that they will have their friends and family around them at the end of their life (81%) and to a lesser extent, that they will be kept pain free (63%). However, people are more likely to be unconfident (46%) than confident (40%) that they will be cared for in the place of their choice.
  - With the exception of medical support, levels of confidence that these things will occur at the end of their life are broadly consistent among those that have not had someone close to them die in the last three years.
Attitudes towards end of life care

- Most people (71%) agree that people in the UK don’t talk about death or dying enough, with one in four people (24%) agreeing strongly with this.
  - Older people are more likely to think this than younger people, with 83% of over 65s agreeing compared to only 48% of 18 – 24 year olds.
- Less than half (45%) agree that they feel uncomfortable talking about death and dying.
- Half of people in the UK (50%) say that if someone close to them were terminally ill, they wouldn’t know where to turn for practical support.
  - Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is particularly true of younger people who may have had less experience than older people of providing practical support for someone who is at the end of their life. 58% of 18 – 24 year olds and 35 – 44 year olds and 61% of 25 – 34 year olds agree that they wouldn’t know where to turn to for practical support. This compares to just 41% of 55 – 64 year olds and 39% of those who are aged 65 and over.
  - People in the West Midlands (58%), the North West (53%) and Scotland (52%) are more likely than people from other regions of the UK to agree that they wouldn’t know where to turn to for practical support if someone close to them were terminally ill.
- Less than half (47%) of people say that they are confident that if they or someone close to them were terminally ill, the NHS would provide them with a high quality of care. However, two in five (40%) people in the UK disagree with this and therefore lack confidence in the NHS to provide high quality care for people at the end of their lives.
  - Women are less confident than men (43% of women agree, 51% of men agree)
  - Older people are less confident than younger people (46% of over 65s agree compared to 52% of 18 – 24 year olds)
  - People in London (40% agree) and the North West (40% agree) are less confident than people in other regions of the UK that the NHS would provide them or a loved one a high quality of care at the end of their lives.
  - Those who have and have not had experience of someone close to them dying in the last three years are equally confident that the NHS would provide high quality of care should they or someone close to them become terminally ill (47%).

Funding end of life care

- On the whole, people tend to think that medical care in an NHS hospital is provided free of charge for someone who is terminally ill or dying (68%). However, people are less sure whether other types of support are provided free of charge.
  - Less than half (47%) of people say that they think personal care in an NHS hospital is provided free of charge and only a minority of people think that medical care and personal care in the home is provided free of charge at the end of life (21% and 16% respectively).

Methodological note: ComRes surveyed 2601 UK adults online from 6th – 8th February. Data were weighted to be demographically representative of adults across the UK. All press releases related to this data must be sent to ComRes 48 hours in advance of their release.