

Use of Distress Thermometers in settings outside of oncology

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Background

Monash Health Deteriorating Patient Committee are working to achieve the requirements for Actions 8.5, 8.6 b, c, d and e and 8.12 that health service organisations must undertake to demonstrate work towards establishing effective processes for recognising and responding to deterioration in a person's mental state. See details [Recognising and Responding to Acute Deterioration Standard](#).

CCE undertook a review to identify validated instruments for recognising deterioration in mental state however as per an earlier review of the literature undertaken for the commission were not able to identify any tools specifically for this use.

As a consequence of this the Deteriorating patient committee would like to trial the Distress Thermometer as a way of capturing deterioration in mental state. They are interested to know whether this tool has been used in settings outside of oncology.

Question

Has the NCCN Distress Thermometer been used in settings other than oncology with success?

Summary of findings

A search of Medline, Psych Info and Google was undertaken looking for studies that described the use of the Distress Thermometer in the hospital setting (excluding Oncology) from 2015 to present. Excluded were studies that looked at the use of the tool for carers or family members and for patients who were being treated in outpatient settings, community or at home.

Eleven examples were identified where the Distress Thermometer and checklist have been used successfully in settings other than oncology. Table 1 outlines the settings and corresponding papers.

Table 1. Examples identified in settings other than oncology

Setting	Reference
General Medicine Population	1
Paediatric population living with Neurofibromatosis type 1	2
Surgical patients (with delirium)	3,4
Respiratory Patients (Recurrent Respiratory Papillomatosis)	5,6
Patients with Fibromyalgia	7
Renal/Haemodialysis patients	8-10
Palliative Care patients	11

Cut off points and clinical utility

Conducted in the setting of cancer patients, Cutillo et al (2017) studied the cut off points and clinical utility of the Distress Thermometer. This has been included to provide Monash Health with guidance for implementation. In research involving mixed samples, cut-off scores indicating distress vary by culture, language, setting, and demographics, but most studies support a cut-off score of 4 or 5 to indicate mild to moderate distress¹². This study highlighted that providers may wish to utilise a cut-off point of 3 to most efficiently identify distress in a large, diverse population of cancer patients.

Conclusion

Craze et al (2014) report that the Distress Thermometer has been used in many oncology, maternity and rehabilitation wards both internationally and nationally and is a reliable self-report tool for identifying psychological distress along a 10-point scale. Although it has not been validated in all of the additional patient settings listed above, these do show that it is reasonable to hypothesize application to other patient populations¹³.

In high-volume settings with limited resources, there is a need to effectively identify and support patients with unmet psychosocial needs and enhance the integration of psychosocial care in patient care, and the Distress Thermometer is a useful tool to achieve this in a timely manner¹. It is hoped that it is made as common as asking for pain scores and seen as a sixth vital sign to monitor¹².

References

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Distress Thermometer and Checklist

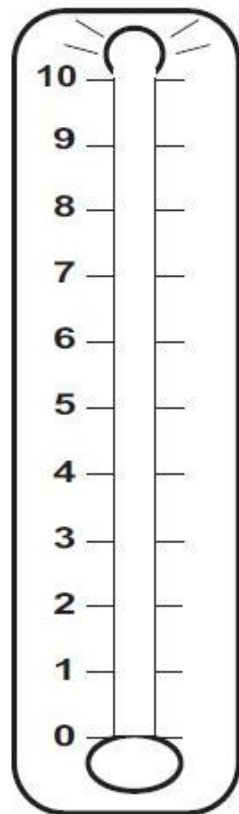
Distress is often unpleasant feelings or emotions that can impact on the way you think, feel and act. It can include feelings like sadness, worry, anger, helplessness and guilt. It's common for someone who has been diagnosed with cancer to experience some level of distress at some point in time (anywhere from diagnosis and beyond). Your level of distress may only be minor or could be more serious where you find that you're not able to do the things you used to do. It's important for your Treatment/Medical Team to know how you're feeling. By completing the following tool your team will work with you and help link you with other supportive services (for example counsellors, social workers, dietitians) when you need or want to.

Instructions:

1) please circle the number 0 – 10 that best describes how much distress you have been experiencing in the past week including today

2) please indicate if any of the following has been a problem for you in the past week including today. Be sure to check YES or NO for each

Extreme distress



No distress

YES	NO	Practical Problems	YES	NO	Physical Problems
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Child care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Appearance
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bathing / dressing
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Insurance / financial	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Breathing
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transportation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Changes in urination
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Work / school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Constipation
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Treatment decisions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Diarrhoea
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Eating
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fatigue
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family Problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Feeling swollen
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dealing with children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fevers
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dealing with partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Getting around
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ability to have children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Indigestion
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family health issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Memory / concentration
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mouth sores
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Emotional Problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nausea
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Depression	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nose dry / congested
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fears	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pain
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nervousness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sexual
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sadness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Skin dry / itchy
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Worry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sleep
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Loss of interest in usual activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Substance abuse
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Spiritual / religious / cultural concerns	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Tingling in hands and feet

Other Problems: _____