

From Screening to Support: Using the Distress Thermometer to Guide Personalized Psychosocial Care in Cancer Treatment

Background

Distress is increasingly recognized as an important component of quality cancer care. The Distress Thermometer (DT) is a simple, validated self-reported screening tool widely used in oncology settings to identify psychosocial distress and supportive care needs. Previous studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in facilitating the early identification of patient concerns and supporting timely referrals to appropriate supportive care services [3,4,5]

At Subang Jaya Medical Centre (SJMC), routine DT screening was implemented for all new oncology patients to identify unmet psychosocial and supportive care needs and facilitate timely multidisciplinary interventions.

Methodology

A retrospective review of Distress Thermometer (DT) screening data collected between February 2023 and February 2026 was conducted. The DT was administered voluntarily to all new oncology patients aged 18 years and above undergoing cancer treatment at Subang Jaya Medical Centre. The assessment was available in English, Chinese, and Malay. Distress scores and reported concerns across physical, emotional, practical, social, and spiritual domains were reviewed to identify psychosocial and supportive care needs, and to facilitate appropriate multidisciplinary interventions and referrals.

Distress Thermometer Screening Tool



Results

Figure 1: Treatment Distribution of New Patients between February 2023 to February 2026 (n=516)

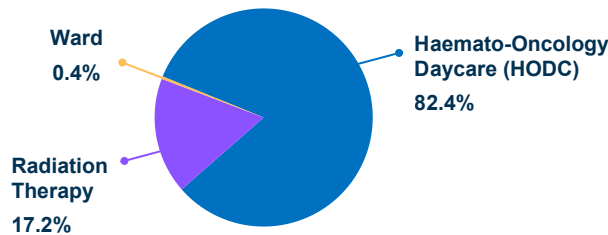


Figure 2: Distribution of Concerns Across Five Domains (n=516)

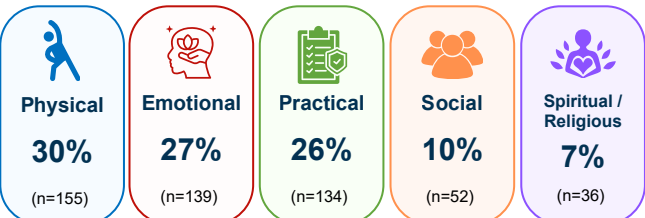


Figure 3: Top-rated Concern By Each Domain (n=516)



Figure 4: Top 10 Concerns Across All Domains (n=516)

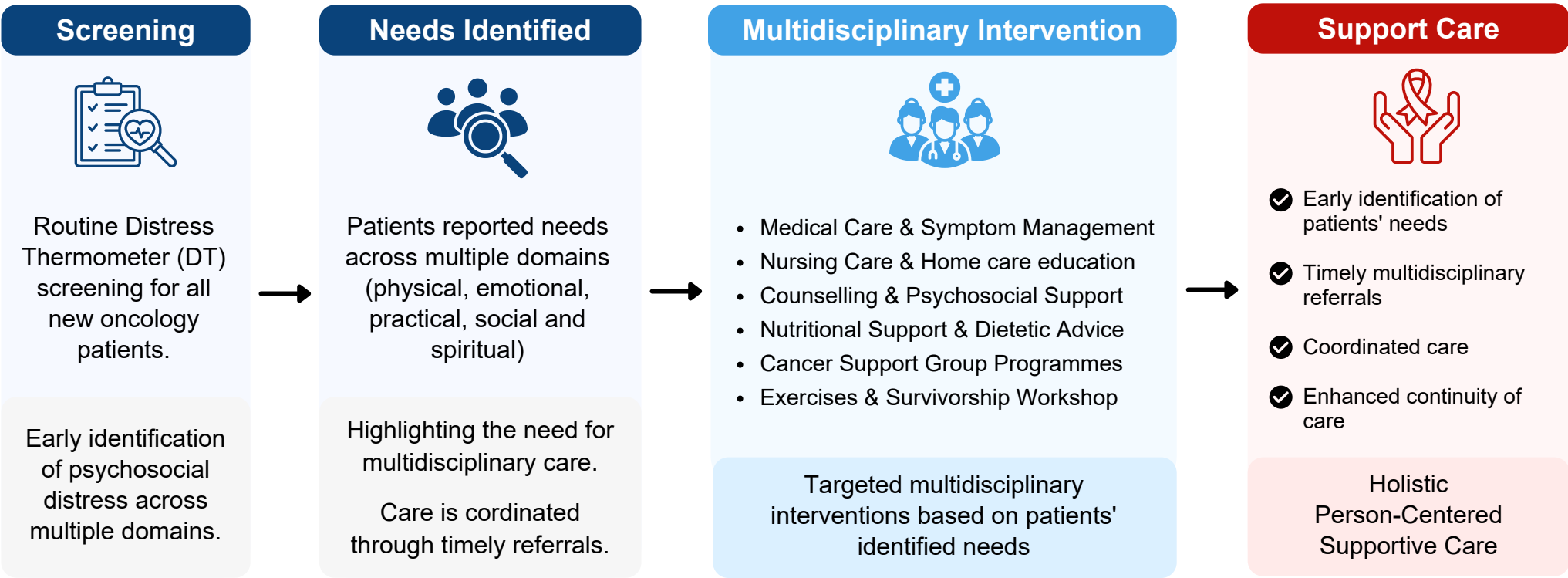


*Concerns are presented in descending order according to the percentage of patients reporting each concern. Items with identical percentages are presented alphabetically.

Discussion & Implications

Physical, emotional, and practical concerns accounted for 83% of all reported concerns and dominated the top 10 concerns, highlighting the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to provide comprehensive, person-centered care.

Figure 5: Clinical Implications From Screening to Multidisciplinary Support



Conclusion

Routine Distress Thermometer (DT) screening transforms distress identification into meaningful supportive care. By identifying concerns across multiple domains, it facilitates timely multidisciplinary interventions and coordinated referrals, ensuring that cancer patients receive holistic, person-centered care tailored to their individual needs.

References:



Limitation

- Single-centre retrospective review, limiting generalisability.
- Self-reported data may be subject to reporting bias.

Future Directions

- Expand DT screening across different treatment phases for continue monitoring and timely multidisciplinary support [1,2].