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Sexual Issues among the Terminally Ill

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The past 40 years has seen tremendous growth in the research and practice of end of life (palliative, hospice) care. What began as a taboo topic at a London hospice has transformed the way the Western world perceives and experiences terminal illness, dying, and death. The hospice and palliative care movement has embraced the mind-body-spirit approach to medical care, or in Social Work terminology, the “bio-psycho-social” understanding of human behaviour and understanding. As the benefits of professional end of life care have been rightfully lauded over the decades, the area of sexuality among terminally ill patients has often been ignored. A review of the scholarly literature illustrates the need for professionals to be trained in this area in order to provide the best holistic care we can to our patients. Sexuality and intimacy are basic human needs, and the presence of a terminal illness will change the way our patients experience these needs. This program will focus on the altered sexuality of terminally ill patients, their continued need for intimate expression, and ways we as health care providers can confront barriers and foster safe dialogues with our patients concerning this universal human desire.

James Fedor is a hospice social worker from New Jersey, USA. He served as lecturer for Rutgers University, where he taught “Death and Terminal Illness” and “Loss Across the Lifespan”. He is currently pursuing his PhD from Rutgers University, where he is focusing his research on end of life issues and international health care.