Quality of life of psoriatic patients – modulatory variables

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Summary

Background. In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the quality of life (QoL) of patients with dermatological conditions. The problem of the stigma associated with some dermatological conditions has been discerned, as patients suffering from chronic dermatoses tend to perceive themselves in a specific way and to assess their QoL as very low.

Objectives. Identification of factors that influence the QoL of patients with psoriasis.

Material and methods. This survey-based quantitative research was carried out at the dermatology ward of the Voivodeship Specialist Hospital, Research and Development Centre in Wroclaw, Poland. The study involved 130 adult patients with a diagnosis of psoriasis, of whom 56.92% (74) were women. The research instruments used were the Dermatology Life Quality Index (DLQI), the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), and a questionnaire of the authors’ own design.

Results. The median for disappearance of psoriatic patches after hospitalization was 5 (range: 0–10). The median for the remission duration was 3 months (range: 0.25 to 24). 61.54% (80) of those surveyed reported improvement in their psoriasis treatment as a result of regular check-ups at the outpatient dermatology clinic. Disease-related anxiety and QoL were determined by marital status and the level of education. Older patients more often had symptoms of depression, according to HADS. Higher DLQI scores correlated with higher HADS-A and HADS-D scores.

Conclusions. Psoriasis has significant effects on patients’ mental states and social functioning. The most serious and unpleasant symptoms are pruritus and skin lesions on the uncovered parts of the body. The patients with the highest risk of a lower QoL are the elderly; those living alone (single or widowed); those with secondary, vocational, or no education; and those with symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Key words: psoriasis, anxiety, quality of life.

Background

Psoriasis is a chronic disease and requires long-term treatment. New methods and biological agents are systematically being introduced to therapy, however complete remission and improvement are difficult to attain. Full recovery has remained so far elusive, and the best outcome achievable is a period of remission, whose length depends on the individual [1]. As the disease progresses, psoriatic patients go through stages of resignation, dejection, anger, and a lack of hope of recovery [2]. The type of dermatological disease is a factor that not only determines the occurrence of depression, but also its severity. The most serious depressive disorders (including a high risk of suicide) are observed among patients with psoriasis covering large skin areas. Extensive lesions and those located in parts of the body that are important for self-image may significantly contribute to the development of depression [3]. Patients with psoriasis are often diagnosed with depressive disorders, which in extreme cases can even lead to suicide attempts [4]. Skin diseases influence three domains of patient functioning: psychological (anxiety, depression, hostility, social sensitivity, feeling of coherence, obsessive-compulsive disorder, altered self-image), somatic (limitations on physical functioning, discomfort, worsening of general health), and social contact (limitations on professional activity, lack of social support groups, satisfaction with therapy, difficulties carrying out social roles) [5].

Psoriasis affects all races, though epidemiological studies show it to be more common in Western Europe and Scandinavia, where it is observed in 1.5–3% of the population (especially in Norway – 4.8%). It hardly ever afflicts black people, and is practically never met in Eskimo and Amerindian populations. The incidence of psoriasis is the same for both sexes and is unrelated to social background, level of education, financial standing, or profession [6].

Researchers dealing with psoriatic patients have made attempts to identify variables that potentially contribute to quality of life (QoL). These variables are mainly associated with the disease itself (severity of pathological lesions, their location and extent, duration of the disease), personality (stress resistance, level of anxiety, depression), and demographic variables (age and sex) [5].

Although psoriasis does not pose a direct threat to life (a fact which often causes patients to neglect treatment), studies of QoL with chronic dermatoses confirm that, in this sense, they can be compared with cardiovascular and respiratory diseases [6]. Regardless severity, everyone copes with the disease in a different way, and so dermatology questionnaires used in measuring the QoL of psoriatic patients [7]. Recent years have seen an increasing interest in the QoL of patients with dermatological conditions. The problem of stigmatization in dermatology has also been observed, as patients suffering from chronic dermatoses tend to perceive themselves in a specific way and to assess their QoL as very low [8].

Dermatoses are very visible diseases which can provoke others to stare and comment. This, in combination with the
chronic character of dermatological disorders, often causes patients to suffer from poor self-esteem and the thought of being negatively perceived by others; they may also not accept either the disease or themselves [9]. Psoriatic patients often have skin lesions in exposed places. This has an impact on their social life and is an additional source of stress that negatively affects treatment of both the primary disease and its comorbidities. According to the literature, it is not the extent of skin lesions that contributes most to the effects of the psoriasis therapy, but the lowering of the QoL level [10]. The QoL is thus assessed in patients who are being qualified to new methods of treatment. Drops in QoL are mostly associated with the humiliation suffered by patients, with everyday unpleasant situations, and with the resulting stress. Patients come to avoid taking part in social life [11]. A worsening of patients' QoL is also linked to chronic pruritus [12]. Considering its nature, psoriasis requires a holistic and patient-tailored approach from the therapeutic team.

Research on the QoL of patients with psoriasis confirms that this disease noticeably impedes patients’ functioning in all aspects of life and is a source of discomfort and distress for sufferers [13].

Objectives

The aim of this study was to identify the factors that influence the QoL of psoriatic patients, including sociodemographic data (age, education, and marital status).

Material and methods

This survey-based quantitative research was carried out between July 2014 and January 2015 in the dermatology ward of the Voivodeship Specialist Hospital, Research and Development Centre in Wroclaw. The research was approved by the Bioethical Commission of Wroclaw Medical University (approval no. KB-432/2014, 3 July 2014).

Study sample

The study involved 130 adult patients with a diagnosis of psoriasis, of which 74 (56.92%) were women. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The mean age was 50.57 years (SD 14.75). The most numerous age group was the 51–65 year olds (34.62%, 45) and the least numerous was that of 36–50 year olds (33.08%, 43). Patients of 35 years or younger made up 15.38% (20) of the study sample. Most respondents (59.23%, 77) were married, 39.23% (25) were single, and those living cohabitation relationships made up 5.39% (7). The majority of the respondents (58.46%, 76) had secondary education, 20.77% (27) had higher education, and 12.31% (16) had primary education.

Research instruments

The research instruments applied in the study were the Dermatology Life Quality Index (DLQI), the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), and a questionnaire of the authors’ own design. The standard dermatology-specific questionnaire, the DLQI, consists of 10 questions. It is used to measure the severity of psoriasis and to assess how much the disease affected QoL over the last week. In our study, the Polish version of the DLQI was employed. The scoring of each question is as follows: 0 points: normal QoL; 1 point: small effect on patient’s life; 2–5 points: slightly lower QoL; 6–10 points: moderately lower QoL; 11–20 points: much lower QoL (very large effect on patient’s life); 21–30 points: extremely lower QoL (extremely large effect on patient’s life).

HADS consists of 14 questions and measures anxiety (HADS-A) and depression (HADS-D). Each item on the questionnaire is scored from 0–3, which means that a person can score a total of 0 to 21 for either anxiety or depression. For anxiety (HADS-A), this gives a specificity of 0.78 and a sensitivity of 0.9. For depression (HADS-D), the specificity is 0.79 and the sensitivity 0.83.

The authors’ questionnaire included 37 questions concerning patients’ sociodemographic data, frequency of hospitalization, visits to the outpatient dermatology clinic, physical complaints, and factors lowering patients’ QoL – such as pruritus, pain, burning sensations, inability to perform everyday activities due to psoriatic lesions, the influence of lesions on work, relations in the family, and social life. The patients were asked about feelings of embarrassment due to the disease and about itching sensations. They marked their answers on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 denoted a complete lack of embarrassment due to the disease, or no itching sensation; while 10 denoted very deep embarrassment due to the disease, or severe itching. When answering questions concerning the severity of psoriasis, the respondents marked their answers on the scale from 0 to 10, with 0 denoting the lack of improvement, and 10 indicating complete remission.

Statistical analysis

The data was analyzed using R statistical software and PSPP version 3.0.2. The variable distribution was verified by means of the Shapiro–Wilk normality test. The Mann–Whitney U-test was employed to compare two subgroups. The correlation analysis was based on the calculation and testing of Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient (rho). Additionally, the Bartlett test, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and the Kruskal–Wallis test (for when the character of the variables did not allow for ANOVA) were used.

Results

In the study sample, the median number of years since diagnosis was 11.5 years (range: 0.25–59). The median for disappearance of psoriatic patches after hospitalization was 5 (range: 0–10). The median for the duration of remission was three months (range: 0.25 to 24).

Improvement in the therapy of psoriasis as a result of regular check-ups in the outpatient dermatology clinic was positively assessed by 61.54% (80) of the surveyed, while 38.46% (50) did not report any noticeable improvement.

Psoriatic lesions were mostly found in elbow areas 55.38% (72). The next most common sites were the trunk (50.00%, 65) and scalp (48.46%, 63). Patients with lesions on their limbs made up 35.38% (46) of the sample, while 16.15% (21) of the surveyed, while 10.77% (14) did not have such complaints at all. The median for burning sensation was 5.0 (range: 0–10), with the strongest level being reported by 8.46% (11) of the respondents, and no burning sensation being reported by 18.46% (24).

There were statistically significant differences in the assessment of the severity of psoriasis between patients with various levels of education (Kruskal–Wallis test: χ² = 9.794; df = 3; p = 0.020). The medians of the responses for particular groups were: 6: primary or no education; 8: vocational education; 10: secondary education; and 8: higher education. The patients who perceived their psoriasis as most severe were those with secondary, vocational, or higher education, while the patients who judged their psoriasis to be least severe were patients with primary or no education.
Of all respondents, 85.38% (111) remained under the continuous care of a physician, while 14.62% (19) were not under a physician’s care. Some 78.46% (102) of the respondents had regular check-ups in the outpatient dermatology clinic, while 21.54% (28) did not. 76.15% (99) of the patients were under the care of a dermatologist, and 18.46% (24) were only under the care of a family doctor. The majority of the patients confirmed that close friends and family members helped them take care of their skin (82.31%, 107). Most patients were assisted by wives, husbands, or partners (56.92%, 74), while 15.38% (20) received help from their children.

In spite of skin lesions, 99% (129) of the patients felt accepted by members of their immediate families. Only one person had not met with such acceptance.

We analyzed incidences of psoriasis among patients’ family members, and found that the most numerous class of patients consisted of those whose close relatives did not have psoriasis (54.62%, 71). In 18.46% (24) of cases, psoriasis was diagnosed in at least one parent, while in 15.38% (20) it was diagnosed in at least one brother or sister.

Most respondents (71.53%, 94) claimed that psoriasis had a profound influence on their mental state, while 28.42% (36) held the opinion that it did not have an effect on their psyche. The most common reaction of people to skin lesions, according to the patients, was looking or starring at them (54.62%, 71). Some 23.85% (31) of those surveyed met with acceptance, while 8.46% (11) met with negative reactions or even disgust.

The median of responses to the question on the level of embarrassment due to the disease when being around other people was 6 (range: 0–10). The disease had a strong negative impact on the social life of 67.69% (88) of the respondents, while 32.31% (42) of the patients did not have such a problem. Psoriatic skin lesions had significant effects on the everyday functioning of 60% (78) of the patients, while 40% (52) did not feel such effects. According to 72.31% (86) of those surveyed, the disease did not have any influence on the choice of profession, while 27.69% (36) indicated that it had.

**DLQI scores**

The median of the scores was 9 (range: 0–26). A moderately lower QoL level (moderate effect on the patient’s life) was reported by 35.39% (46) of the patients, a much lower QoL level (a very large effect on the patient’s life) by 28.46% (37), a slightly lower QoL (a small effect on the patient’s life) by 20.00% (26), and an extremely lower QoL level (an extremely large effect on the patient’s life) by 10.00% (13). Merely 6.15% (8) of the patients had a normal QoL level, meaning that the condition had no effect at all on the patient’s life.

There were statistically significant differences in the assessment of the influence of psoriasis on the QoL between patients with different marital statuses (Kruskal–Wallis test: $\chi^2 = 10.411; df = 3; p = 0.034$). The medians of the responses for specific groups were as follows: 12 for single, 8 for married, 8 for widowed, 6 for divorced, and 9 for other types of relationship. Thus, the impact of psoriasis was the most profound in single individuals.

The DLQI scores depended neither on the patients’ sex (Mann–Whitney $U$-test: $W = 2341; p = 0.206$) nor their place of residence (Kruskal–Wallis test: $\chi^2 = 2.5521; df = 3; p = 0.466$).

**HADS scores**

The median of the scores was 9 (range: 0–27); the median for HADS-A was 6.5 (range: 0–21), while the median for HADS-D was 6 (range: 0–17).

Sex did not have a statistically significant impact on HADS-D scores (Mann–Whitney $U$-test: $W = 2065; p = 0.976$). Quite the opposite was true for patients’ age: older patients more often had symptoms of depression than younger patients. The older the patients were, the higher the HADS-D scores they obtained ($r = 0.197; p = 0.025$).

There were statistically significant differences in anxiety levels depending on marital status (Kruskal–Wallis test: $\chi^2 = 12.486; df = 4; p = 0.014$). The medians of the responses for the groups were as follows: 8 (single), 6 (married), 8 (widowed), 0 (divorced), 5 (other types of relationship). Patients who complained of anxiety were mostly either single or widowed (Fig. 1).

There were also statistically significant differences in anxiety levels depending on the level of education (Kruskal–Wallis test: $\chi^2 = 9.411; df = 3; p = 0.024$). The medians of the responses for particular groups were 7 (for primary or no education), 4 (for vocational education), 7 (for secondary education), and 5 (for higher education). Anxiety was thus mostly observed in patients with secondary, primary, or no education, while those with vocational or higher education suffered from anxiety less often.

There were statistically significant differences in the severity of depressive symptoms depending on marital status (ANOVA results: $F = 3.474; df1 = 4; df2 = 125; p = 0.010$). The medians of the responses for particular groups were: 7 (single), 6 (married), 8 (widowed), 2 (divorced), and 3 (other types of relationship). Patients who complained of depression were mostly widowed, followed by single individuals (Fig. 2).

**Figure 1. Differences in anxiety levels depending on marital status**
The DLQI scores vs. HADS scores

There were statistically significant relationships between the DLQI and HADS-A scores ($r = 0.467; p < 0.001$) and between the DLQI and HADS-D scores ($r = 0.569; p < 0.001$). Thus, higher DLQI scores correlated with higher HADS-A and HADS-D scores.

Discussion

Both the available literature and our analysis show that psoriasis has considerable effects on the QoL of patients and on their functioning at home and in society. We observed that the more profound the influence psoriasis exerted on particular aspects of everyday life, the higher the probability of a low QoL and the development of depressive symptoms. Depression and anxiety, on the other hand, may lead to a further worsening of the QoL. Kanikowska et al. reported that depression and anxiety, on the other hand, result in a lower QoL and higher frequency of depressive symptoms [16]. Deterioration of everyday mood, on the other hand, complaints have decidedly worse physical and mental states [14]. Only 8% of patients see no negative effects of psoriasis [14].

In our study, the majority of patients did not notice any negative impact of the disease on relationships with their immediate family and more distant relatives. Only a few received negative disease-related feedback from other people. Other authors confirmed that the negative influence of psoriasis on QoL was associated with stress, especially when psoriatic patches developed at puberty or early adulthood. People with psoriasis often regard themselves as less attractive and may decide to withdraw from social contact, feeling humiliated and stigmatized by others. This is a stress factor that directly impinges on psychological maturity and personality type. About half of patients perceive the disease as a very serious stress factor, one fifth consider themselves to socially isolated, 10–12% endure humiliation from their relatives, and approximately 7% are not accepted as sexual partners [7, 19].

The main inconvenience reported by psoriatic patients is pruritus [9]. Although, in the past, psoriasis was regarded as not accompanied by pruritus, it is assumed now that 70–90% of patients experience severe itching that at least 30% have it all over the body. Patients consider pruritus as the most irritating and unpleasant symptom. It causes patients trouble falling asleep and results in them waking up frequently throughout the night. Chronic pruritus negatively affects patients’ psyche. Those suffering from itching have lower self-esteem and thus more often feel aggression and frustration [8]. Gupta believes that the intensity of itching is related to the severity of depressive disorders, and pruritus can be significantly alleviated by antidepressant treatment [20].

Skin lesions – especially those located on uncovered parts of the body – draw the attention of other people, often evoking unhelpful reactions. Negative self-image of the body, the feeling of being stigmatized by the surrounding community, and the lack of hope of full recovery may be the source of mental disorders. The study of Richards et al., who analyzed the relationships between stigmatization, stress, and the worse daily functioning of psoriatic patients, confirmed that patients were indeed stigmatized by the disease. They also had significantly higher levels of stress due to expected adverse reactions, and statistically significantly, many suffered from psychiatric disorders [21].

Our analysis shows that, most respondents obtained improvement to their symptoms through regular check-ups at the outpatient dermatology clinic. The majority of in-patients at the dermatology ward reported a visible improvement and a decrease in psoriatic skin lesions after hospital treatment, but the complete disappearance of skin lesions was very rare.

Taking into account the duration of the disease, its frequent recurrences, and short remission periods, we can see...
that patients admitted to the dermatology ward have very advanced lesions or inveterate psoriasis. This may be associated with the cost of treatment, but may also be due to patients not being able to cope with the care demanded by the afflicted skin areas, or else they live alone. In the study sample, the longest remission period for psoriatic lesions (24 months) was only observed in a small proportion of patients, as was remission lasting for over six months.

Our findings show that elderly psoriatic patients suffer more often from depression than younger patients. Baranowska et al., on the other hand, demonstrated a re-fer more often from depression than younger patients. As was remission lasting for over six months.

The majority of the respondents in our study reported moderate and very large effects of psoriasis on their QoL. Similar results were obtained in the assessment of satisfaction with life performed at the Clinic of Dermatology and Venereology of the Medical University of Wroclaw, where psoriatic patients’ satisfaction with their life, according to the Satisfaction with Life Scale, ranged from 9 to 31 points (average: 19.2 ± 6.0 points), and was significantly lower than in the control group (range of 9–33 points, average score: 22.0 ± 5.3 points). The study conducted in this Clinic demonstrated a weak but significant correlation between the severity of psoriatic lesions and satisfaction with life (r = −0.25; p = 0.02). Aside from the severity of psoriatic lesions, financial standing was the only of the investigated parameters that influenced the level of satisfaction with life of psoriatic patients. Age, sex, education, marital status, a penchant for abusing substances, and susceptibility to addictions were not significant contributors [22]. The study of Bundy et al. provided evidence that younger individuals assessed their QoL better, regardless of their sex, education, and marital status [16]. In our study, the QoL of psoriatic patients did not depend on their sex, but was determined by their education and marital status.

On the basis of genetic tests performed at the Clinic of Dermatology and Allergology, Medical University of Gdańsk, it is estimated that the risk of psoriasis in a person who has a family history of this disease is 41% if both parents are affected, and 14% if only one parent is afflicted [23]. What is more, family psoriasis is more common among patients who suffer onset of the disease in young age [24]. The above observations were not confirmed in our study, due to the small size of the study sample.

**Limitations**

Because of the small size of the study sample, our analysis failed to take into account the division of psoriasis into its clinical forms and the severity of psoriatic lesions. It would be worth considering the two basic clinical forms of psoriasis: mild (psoriasis vulgaris) and severe (psoriasis erythroderma) in any further research into the QoL of psoriatic patients, since there may be significant differences in QoL levels as measured by HADS between these two groups.

It would be also interesting to analyze modulatory variables, such as disease stage, type of the treatment (corticosteroids for local treatment or biological agents), and character and extent of nail-plate damage. These variables may influence HADS scores or the QoL level of patients with psoriatic lesions.

Calculation of the Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI) and comparison of two groups of patients with the same value of the severity index will allow us to determine the QoL of psoriatic patients with greater accuracy.

**Conclusions**

Psoriasis has significant effects on patients’ mental state and social functioning. The most serious and unpleasant symptoms are pruritus and skin lesions on uncovered parts of the body. The patients at the highest risk of decreased QoL are the elderly; those living alone (single or widowed); those with secondary, vocational, or no education; and those with symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Source of funding: This work was founded by funds allocated to the statutory activities of the Department of Family Medicine Medical University in Wroclaw and by the authors’ resources.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interests.

**References**


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Received: 29.03.2016
Revised: 30.03.2016
Accepted: 09.04.2016