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CANCER AND DISABILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTION OF CHRONIC ILLNESS, FUNCTIONAL IMPAIRMENT, AND THE ROLE OF LITERATURE

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 31/05/2025 Accepted: 22/6/2025	With millions diagnosed worldwide, cancer is a chronic illness that significantly impacts a person's social and emotional well-being. Its adverse effects extend beyond physical suffering to emotional distress and, in many cases, long-term disability. This paper explores the intersection of cancer and disability, examining the extent to which cancer patients qualify as disabled. It focuses on the challenges faced by disabled individuals with cancer, the role of literature in articulating their experiences, and the support systems that aid in their rehabilitation and social integration. Among all mediums, literature emerges as a powerful tool for representing the lived realities of cancer patients and advocating for inclusive policies. Ultimately, this paper argues that literature plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between medical understanding and human experience, making it indispensable in the discourse on cancer and disability.
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INTRODUCTION

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (2023), an estimated 20 million new cancer cases and 10 million cancer-related deaths occurred globally in 2023, with projections indicating a continued rise in the coming decades. While advancements in early detection and medical treatment have improved survival rates, the aftermath of cancer and its therapies often results in long-term complications. These include physical impairments, cognitive challenges, and psychological trauma, all of which

Cancer and Disability: Understanding the Intersection of Chronic Illness, Functional Impairment, and the Role of Literature can significantly reduce an individual's quality of life and functional independence (Fife, Wright, & Monahan, 2020).

From legal, social, and economic perspectives, classifying cancer as a disability is increasingly important, as it directly impacts survivors' access to healthcare services, workplace accommodations, and social security benefits. However, many survivors experience invisible or misunderstood impairments that remain insufficiently addressed in both policy and public discourse. Literature—through memoirs, poetry, fiction, and personal narratives—plays a pivotal role in illuminating the subjective realities of living with and beyond cancer. It bridges the gap between the clinical view of illness and the nuanced emotional, social, and existential experiences of patients.

This study seeks to explore the complex relationship between cancer and disability, focusing on three central research questions: (1) To what extent does cancer and its treatment lead to long-term disability? (2) How is cancer-related disability represented in literary texts? and (3) What role can literature play in shaping public understanding and influencing policy related to cancer and disability

How Disability Is Defined in Relation to Cancer

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a disability is a condition that restricts a person's capacity to carry out daily tasks. When cancer substantially impairs one or more key living functions, it may be considered a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and comparable laws around the world. A person's eligibility for disability payments is determined by a number of factors, including the cancer's stage, side effects from therapy, and the duration of functional restrictions (Oliver, 1983). Depending on the type of cancer and how it is treated, impairments from the disease may be short-term, long-term, or permanent.

The Role of Cancer in Disability

Cancer and its treatments can lead to various physical and cognitive impairments. Physical disabilities include neuropathy, lymphedema, chronic pain, fatigue, and mobility problems that hinder individuals from performing daily activities. Cognitive impairments, often referred to as "chemo brain," affect executive functioning, memory, and concentration, complicating the return to professional or academic life (Mitchell et al., 2011). Additionally, cancer-related disabilities extend beyond physical and cognitive limitations to psychosocial impacts, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Mitchell et al., 2011). These mental health conditions significantly affect social and professional engagement, often resulting in isolation, reduced quality of life, and emotional distress.

Cancer survivors with disabilities encounter multiple challenges. Employment concerns are a major issue, as many individuals face workplace discrimination, lack of accommodations, and even termination due to their chronic illness and functional limitations. In many cases, employers may be unwilling to adjust work responsibilities or provide flexible schedules, making it difficult for survivors to maintain employment. Some struggle with job security due to frequent medical appointments, fatigue, and cognitive impairments (Fife, Wright, & Monahan, 2020). Despite legal protections such as the ADA, enforcement of these rights remains inconsistent. Financial instability due to job loss or reduced working hours further compounds the burden, making it challenging for individuals to afford necessary medical care and rehabilitation services (Harrison et al., 2018). Addressing these employment challenges requires stronger policy implementation, workplace education, and advocacy for inclusive practices.

Literature's Contribution to the Understanding of Disability and Cancer

Literature plays a vital role in communicating the lived experiences of individuals with cancer-related disabilities, offering profound insights into their emotional and physical struggles. Through academic narratives, poetry, fiction, and memoirs, literature provides a window into the psychological and emotional hardships these individuals endure, allowing readers to develop empathy and a deeper understanding of their challenges. By shedding light on personal experiences, literature fosters awareness and advocacy, encouraging discussions that can influence policy and promote societal transformation. Such narratives help break down stereotypes and misconceptions, ultimately reducing stigma and fostering inclusion. And writing and reading about these experiences have therapeutic benefits, enabling patients and caregivers to process emotions, find solace in shared narratives, and derive strength from the resilience of others. Literature also serves as a cultural and social lens, offering diverse perspectives on how different societies perceive illness, disability, and survivorship. By exploring these viewpoints, literature challenges existing biases and broadens public understanding, contributing to a more inclusive society.

The interdisciplinary field of narrative medicine emphasizes the value of storytelling in medical practice and how literature can improve patient care by fostering empathy and deeper patient-clinician relationships. Numerous literary works illustrate the struggles associated with cancer and disability: John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* addresses themes of love, loss, and resilience through the lives of two young cancer patients. Lucy Grealy's memoir *Autobiography of a Face* explores self-perception and social acceptance while narrating her battle with cancer and facial disfigurement. Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* critically examines the historical stigmatization of illness, particularly cancer. Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* presents a moving account of a

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neurosurgeon diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, offering reflections on identity and mortality. Poetry collections like *The Cancer Poetry Project*, edited by Karin B. Miller, provide intimate insights into the experiences of cancer patients, survivors, caregivers, and loved ones, amplifying their voices and emotional journeys.

Support Networks for Disabled Cancer Patients

Cancer patients with disabilities have access to various social and legal support networks designed to enhance their quality of life and ensure their rights are protected. Legal protections, such as the Equality Act in the UK and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the U.S., prevent discrimination in workplaces and public services. Financial support programs, including Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), help cover medical expenses and daily living costs. Medical and rehabilitation services, such as mental health counseling, occupational therapy, and physical therapy, are critical for improving overall well-being and promoting independence (Harrison et al., 2018).

Community organizations, including palliative care centers, Cancer Care, and the American Cancer Society, provide emotional guidance, practical resources, and peer support. In the workplace, policies that allow disability leave, flexible schedules, and remote work options support patients in managing their health while remaining professionally active. Collectively, these networks provide comprehensive support, advocating for equal rights, financial stability, and accessible healthcare.

Suggestions for Practice and Policy

Supporting individuals who face both cancer and disability requires a multifaceted approach that strengthens legal, financial, healthcare, and social frameworks. Legislative protections must be reinforced to safeguard against discrimination and ensure equitable access to services. Expanding financial assistance programs to address long-term disabilities from cancer treatments can alleviate the burden on survivors. Workplace regulations should mandate flexible scheduling, remote work options, and extended leave policies to accommodate employees undergoing treatment.

Comprehensive rehabilitation services—including physical therapy, mental health counseling, and occupational therapy—should be widely available to help survivors regain independence. Public awareness campaigns are essential to reduce stigma and promote inclusion. Literature should be integrated into therapeutic and clinical contexts to support emotional expression and recovery, empowering individuals to share their experiences and advocate for improved care. These measures collectively foster a more equitable and compassionate environment that prioritizes the well-being of cancer survivors with disabilities.

Disability and cancer are deeply interconnected, as many cancer survivors experience chronic impairments that significantly impact their daily lives. These disabilities may result from the disease itself or as side effects of treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery, leading to lasting physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges. Recognizing cancer as a form of disability is crucial for ensuring that survivors receive appropriate financial support, legal protections, and access to rehabilitation services. Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and similar international policies offer essential safeguards against discrimination, enabling individuals to maintain employment, access public services, and receive workplace accommodations. Beyond these legal and structural supports, literature serves a powerful function in illuminating the lived experiences of those navigating life with both cancer and disability. Through memoirs, poetry, and fiction, literature fosters empathy, challenges stigma, and advocates for stronger, more inclusive healthcare and social policies. Moving forward, literature must continue to play a central role in healthcare advocacy, not only by giving voice to patient experiences but also by shaping a more compassionate and responsive system of care.

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