

# Free as a butterfly: symbology and palliative care



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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between butterflies and palliative care. A qualitative ethnographic study was performed, based on participant observation in two Oncology Palliative Care Services in Brazil and in Portugal. A literature review on the etymological and symbolic meaning of butterflies, followed by discussions with experts who have studied this insect and its presence in art, books and movies, was undertaken. Butterfly symbols vary from place to place and from people to people, and the semantics and representation of the insect are associated with various forms of life, culture, religion and belief. The constant and intriguing presence of butterflies on the walls and windows of the hospitals studied has a significance for palliative care. The metamorphosis of butterflies is symbolically associated with radical changes in human lives, with death perceived as a possibility for renewal. Therefore, the breaking of the cocoon is the death of the body, when the soul achieves freedom in the image of the butterfly. Thus, palliative care, in its theoretical philosophy and applied practice, assists and eases this process of change in the lives of patients and their families, without denying the death, pain nor suffering experienced by the elderly during an advanced disease.

**Key words:** Palliative Care;  
Death; Butterflies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Concepts and ideas about death and dying have undergone a number of historical and social changes over the centuries. Today, death suggests something painful for humans, and conjures up feelings of loss, the pain of grief, a sense of finitude and the fear of an uncertain future. It is a certainty that we will all die, and yet we live our lives without thinking about death. Witnessing the arrival of death is no longer a custom in our society, and waiting for death is difficult to bear. The exclusion of death and the dying are cited as key features of contemporary society, highlighting the loss of autonomy of the individual and his or her non-participation in decision-making within the hospital.<sup>1</sup>

According to the World Health Organization, the palliative care approach improves the quality of life of patients and their families when faced with problems associated with terminal illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by identifying, assessing and treating pain and other physical, psychosocial and spiritual problems.<sup>2</sup> The crucial issue in palliative care is the quality of life in question, and not simply the amount of time an individual has left to live. The principles of palliative care affirm life and treat facing death as a natural process; do not seek to postpone or prolong death; provide relief from pain and other symptoms by integrating care and offering support so that patients can live as actively as possible, and help family members and caregivers in the grieving process.<sup>3</sup> Palliative care, then, seeks to “humanize” dying. According to Saunders,<sup>4</sup> it is important to ensure the care of the human being as a whole, promoting overall wellness and maintaining dignity, so that he or she can live his or her death and not be dispossessed of his or her own life. It is worthy of note that many patients in palliative care are elderly.

The present study is an ethnographic essay based on Oncology Palliative Care Services in Brazil and Portugal, and forms part of a doctoral

research project. During such research, I noticed that one image was repeated in palliative care units: the butterfly. Wherever I looked, there they were, sometimes big and sometimes small, but always extremely colorful, like a rainbow. Sometimes they were accompanied by flowers, giving the idea of a garden. It is likely they have been pasted onto walls and windows as part of a strategy to “humanize” the hospital environment. But the images made me wonder, why butterflies? Undoubtedly there was a special significance behind the use of these images. But what? These questions intrigued me enough to lead me to investigate the relationship between the symbolism of butterflies and palliative care.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative ethnographic study was carried out in 2013, based on participant observation in the field. Qualitative research involves an interpretive approach, in which the researcher studies the phenomenon from within, seeking to identify the meaning of such a phenomenon while respecting the significance that people attribute to it.<sup>5</sup>

Field work is an essential part of qualitative research.<sup>6</sup> The institutions participating in the present study were the Hospital do Câncer IV (HC IV) of the Instituto Nacional de Câncer José Alencar Gomes da Silva (INCA), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brazil; and the Palliative Care Service (PCS) of the Instituto Português de Oncologia Francisco Gentil (IPO), Porto, Portugal. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committees of NCA and IPO under record numbers 462.858/2013 and 108/2013, respectively.

The ease of access to the HC IV of INCA that I enjoyed, a result of my professional role as a nutritionist at this institution, allowed immersive study of this unit, its physical structure, staff and patients, and how its palliative care strategy functions. I sought to perform a similar

observation at the IPO PCS, where I spent a period of 15 days as a visiting professional in the Nutrition and Food Service. An ethnographic approach was used to describe the field of study, identify the social scenario and contextualize the data collection, in order to provide continuity with the other phases of the study.

While participant observation includes involvement in daily or routine activities in the research stage, when researchers decide to study a community considered to be well-known or well-understood, they should realize that the dynamics of change lead to the inclusion of certain determinant factors hitherto ignored in the network of social interaction.<sup>7</sup>

The first step in analyzing the relationship between butterflies and palliative care was to perform a review of literature on the etymological and symbolic meaning of butterflies. This was followed by meetings with experts in the study of this insect and its presence in art, books and movies. To deepen the symbolic connection between butterflies and palliative care, the ideas of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross were analyzed as a theoretical framework.

## RESULTS

One aspect of the symbolism of butterflies is based on metamorphosis: the chrysalis is the egg that contains the potentiality of a living being, and the butterfly that appears from within it is a symbol of resurrection, a kind of emergence from the grave.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the life stages of this insect, namely caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly signify, respectively, life, death and resurrection, and as such represent the Christian metamorphosis.<sup>9</sup> The butterfly is, therefore, associated with this natural phenomenon of successive transformations, which include a state of ideal maturity, a symbolic funeral, and the posthumous fate of the deceased who, after he or she has traveled a hard, rocky road, achieves a state of plenitude, in his or her quality as a

new Osiris. The butterfly acquires an important semantic significance, becoming the symbol of a life that is constantly renewing itself, a sign of rebirth following death.<sup>10</sup>

Symbolism of this kind is used in the Greek myth of Psyche, who is drawn with butterfly wings, as well as in the frescoes of Pompeii, in which she appears as a winged girl, similar to a butterfly.<sup>8</sup> The Greek term *psych*, from *psyche*, which means “breath, breath of life, soul”, forms part of a number of words in the Greek language and later in many terms introduced into international scientific language from the nineteenth century onwards. The word *psychology*, for example, means the “science of nature, human functions and phenomena of the soul or mind” in a definition dating from 1844.<sup>11</sup>

In works of art, Psyche is represented, together with Cupid, as a young woman with butterfly wings in the various scenes described in the story.<sup>12</sup> Such was Psyche’s beauty that Venus came to be jealous of her. The goddess ordered Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with an evil-looking creature, but instead Cupid himself became her lover. To keep their love secret, Cupid put her in a palace, but only visited her in the dark and forbid her to try to see him. Driven by jealousy, Psyche’s sisters told her that he was a monster and would devour her. One night, Psyche used a lamp to light the room so that she could see Cupid when he was sleeping, but a drop of oil fell from the lamp and woke him. As a consequence, Cupid abandoned her. Alone and full of remorse, Psyche sought her lover throughout the land, and was set several challenges by Venus before she could see him again. All the tasks were eventually completed except the last, which was to descend to Hades and bring back a box containing a dose of the beauty of Persephone. Just as she is about to complete the task, Psyche cannot resist opening the box, and finds nothing in it except an “infernal sleep” that sends her into a torpor. Cupid, however, persuaded Jupiter to allow him to marry his lover, and Psyche ascended to

heaven. The sculpture *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss*, by Antonio Canova (1787), exhibited in the Louvre, Paris, exemplifies this passage from Greek mythology.

The Greek name for both butterfly and soul, then, is *psyche*. And there is no illustration of the immortality of the soul as impressive and beautiful as a butterfly. After the creeping, limited life of a caterpillar goes through the pupal stage, the butterfly then extends its brightly colored wings as it emerges from the tomb, floating in the cool breeze of the day and becoming one of the most beautiful and delicate aspects of spring. Similarly, Psyche is the human soul purified by suffering and misfortunes, also ready to enjoy true happiness.<sup>12</sup>

As previously stated, the Greek word *psyche* originally had two meanings, the soul and butterfly, with the latter symbolizing the immortal spirit. According to popular Greek belief, when someone died, the spirit left the body in the form of a butterfly.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, butterfly symbolism varies from place to place and from people to people, as their significance is associated with various forms of life, cultures, religions and beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

The etymology of the word butterfly is a common term for daytime lepidopteran insects with clavate antennae. It most probably comes from the Latin *belbellita*, based on *bellus* “good, beautiful.” The Portuguese word *Mariposa*, meaning moth, is a general designation for the nocturnal *Lepidoptera heterocera*. The word derives from the Castilian terms *Maria* and *posa*, the imperative of *posar*, meaning “to land”.<sup>11</sup> The ancient Greeks converted butterflies, particularly white butterflies, into symbols for the soul in the West. In this analogy, the butterfly is the human soul purified by earthly suffering, ready to enjoy the happiness after the tomblike pupa.<sup>8</sup>

The butterfly is also considered a symbol of lightness and inconstancy. The flight of the

butterfly towards the fire reminds us of the flight of Icarus towards the sun. In some traditions, the flame is a symbol of purification, enlightenment and spiritual love, representing the image of the spirit and transcendence, the soul of fire.<sup>8</sup>

Insects tend to be guided in flight by natural light sources such as the sun and the moon, maintaining a constant angle with such sources by flying straight. During a lecture by Professor Alcimar do Lago Carvalho at the Entomology Exhibition at the National Museum of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, a diagram was sketched of the theoretical flight trajectory of a moth, drawn to an artificial light source. In an attempt to maintain the same angle relative to such a nearby light source, which could be a candle or a light bulb, the diagram showed a spiral trajectory, which ended at the point of contact with the light, directing the moth to its probable demise.

This Entomology exhibition also featured a cultural showcase citing a number of works of art which showed butterflies displaying symbolic values for the artists and their time. The painting *Virgin And Child With Angels* by Jean Malouel (Netherlands/France, 1410), for example, shows that in the context of Catholicism at the end of the Middle Ages, in parallel with the troubadour movement's context of loving homage, which basically consisted of worshipping an unattainable woman, the eyes of the faithful turn to worship the Virgin Mary. In this painting, the moths, nocturnal insects, symbolize the men lost in the darkness of their earthly lives, being conducted to the bright light of the golden halo, which represents the idea of landing on Mary, in keeping with the etymological meaning of the word *mariposa* (moth).

The association between butterflies, flame, their colors and the flapping of wings also appears in Aztec culture. The Aztec god of fire takes as his emblem a breastplate called *obsidian butterfly*. Obsidian, like flint, is a fire stone and was known

to form the blades of sacrificial knives. The Sun, in the House of the Eagles or the Temple of the Warriors, appeared as a butterfly image. The symbol of daytime solar fire, and therefore of the souls of the warriors, the butterfly is also for Mexicans a symbol of the black sun on its nightly passage across the underworld. It is therefore a symbol of the hidden Estonian fire, connected to the idea of sacrifice, death and resurrection. Therefore the *Obsidian Butterfly* is attributed to the Estonian gods and associated with death. In Aztec glyphic imagery, it became a surrogate hand, or a sign of the number five, the number of the center of the world.

The ancient people of central Zaire considered that man followed the butterfly cycle from life to death: a small worm in infancy, a large caterpillar in maturity, and then the cocoon as a tomb, from where the soul departs, flying away in the form of a butterfly. In this comparison, the egg that this butterfly lays is an expression of reincarnation. A popular belief in Greco-Roman antiquity also represented the soul leaving the body of the dead as a butterfly. This belief is also found among certain Iranian influenced Turkish populations of Central Asia, in which the deceased can appear in the form of a moth.<sup>8</sup>

In Japan, the butterfly is the emblem of a woman, representing grace and lightness. But two butterflies signify conjugal happiness.<sup>8</sup> In this way, marital happiness is symbolized by two butterflies (male and female), a design often seen at weddings.<sup>9</sup> Butterflies are regarded as spirit travelers due to their subtle lightness, and their presence can announce the visit or the death of someone close.<sup>8</sup>

On another visit to the National Museum, I tried to learn more about the meaning of these insects. A representative of the Alexandre Soares Institution provided information on the anatomy, physiology and biology of both butterflies and moths, and then showed me images of the Death's-head Hawk-moth. This name refers to

any of the three species of moths of the genus *Acherontia* (*A.atropos*, *A.lachesis* and *A.styx*). The three are quite similar in size, color and life cycle. All have the ability to emit a loud cry, produced by expelling air from the pharynx, an action that is often accompanied by bright and colorful flashes of the abdomen, in an attempt to deter predators. They are commonly observed raiding the hives of different bee species to take honey, and are easily distinguishable by a pattern similar to a human skull on their backs. The skull and its associations with the supernatural and evil has led to superstitious fears surrounding these insects.

The names of the *atropos*, *lachesis* and *styx* species are all derived from Greek mythology and are related to death. The first and second form part of the three destinies. The first cuts the threads of life of all beings, and the second corresponds to the destiny that allocates the correct amount of life to a being. The last species refers to the river of the dead.<sup>12</sup> The Styx is the river that separated the dead the living from the dead in Greek mythology, with Charon was the boatman in charge of the crossing of souls, and also the name of the character in the novel *As Esganadas* ("The Strangled"), by Jo Soares.<sup>13</sup>

*The man is thin. More than thin. Gaunt, dried up, emaciated. He would serve ideally for a caricature of Death, but his connection with Thanatos went beyond the creation of any artist. He inherited the profession of undertaker of the Styx from his father (...). Charon is tall, very tall. Dressed in black with long, straggly hair, he looks even more emaciated. With his cadaverous pallor, his withered skin resembles that of the dead that he transports. He washed and dressed his first corpse at thirteen.*

In addition, the name *Acherontia* is derived from Acheron, a river of Greek myth which is said to be a branch of the Styx. The word *Acheron* can be translated as "river of woe". The Styx was located in the underworld, from where Charon leads the newly arrived souls across the river to the gates of Hades, who is the god of

the “underworld, the world of the dead.” The souls are guarded by a monstrous dog with many heads called Cerberus, which lets them enter but never leave.<sup>12</sup>

Death's-head moths were portrayed in the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), directed by Jonathan Demme and based on the novel of the same name published in 1988 by Thomas Harris.<sup>1</sup> In the film, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), a rookie FBI agent, searches for a serial killer known only as “Buffalo Bill”, who attacks young women and then removes their skins. To build the profile of this psychopath, the FBI enlists the help of an imprisoned killer, namely Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), a cannibal and psychiatrist. The pupa of *A. Styx* that is found on the palate of the victims is a vital clue in the case, and it is significant that the species depicted is *A. atropos*. In addition, the moth hiding the mouth of Jodie Foster in the poster of the film shows a skull with naked women. This picture, dated 1939, is by the surrealist painter Salvador Dalí.

Set in present day Barcelona, the Mexican drama *Beautiful* (2010), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, tells the story of Uxbal (Javier Bardem), a black marketeer involved in the sale of counterfeit goods by Senegalese street vendors and organizing badly paid work for undocumented Chinese laborers. He is also a medium, and earns money off those who wish to know more about their deceased loved ones. After experiencing weeks of severe pain, he is diagnosed with prostate cancer and told he has only a few months to live. The film makes

intermittent use of the presence of black moths on Uxbal's bedroom ceiling, the number of which increases according to the worsening of his condition, so announcing the central character's inevitable fate, death.

The last three years of Vincent van Gogh's life were a period of intense personal and professional frustration, during which he coincidentally incorporated white butterflies in his paintings, such as in paintings *Poppies and Butterflies* and *Long Grass With Butterflies* (Netherlands, 1890). Icons of a freed soul, these can be understood as a kind of entomological representation of the progressive deterioration of his physical and mental health, representing his own wish for death and release from this earthly life.

In the field work of the present study, butterflies appeared as decoration in the palliative care environments. The painting (Figure 1) of flowers and butterflies, shown in the photograph below, also transmits this idea of the butterfly as the cleansed human soul, integrated into nature, irrigating the flowers, and perhaps adding to the individual's own understanding of birth and death as natural life processes. This wall faces the elevators on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the HC IV, opposite the nurses' station.

In the IPO Porto, we found a picture of butterflies (Figure 2) hanging on the wall next to the entrance to one of the PCS rooms. According to information gathered from employees, the picture was probably painted during a recreational activity with patients and caregivers.



**Figure 1.** Wall on 6th floor of Hospital do Câncer IV, Instituto Nacional do Câncer, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2013.



**Figure 2.** Painting of butterflies and sunflower in Palliative Care Service, Instituto Português de Oncologia, Porto, Portugal, 2013.

The majority of patients treated at HC IV are male (58%), with a median age of 55 years (21-99 years). Around 85% of patients have up to four years of education, a very important issue when identifying patients and caregivers who require a differentiated approach, due to understanding difficulties.<sup>15</sup> According to an inpatient sample from February 2010 to May 2011, provided by one of the doctors of the PCS, 59% of patients were male and 41% female. The average age was 65.2±12.9 years. A total of 71% of patients died while at the hospital, a figure that illustrates the fact that many of the patients treated in palliative care units are elderly.<sup>16</sup>

The American film *Blue Butterfly*, 2004, directed by Léa Pool, tells the story of a 10-year-old boy named Peter Carlton (Marc Donato), diagnosed with brain cancer and given a short time to live, who loves observing the lives of insects. He is wheelchair bound and his biggest dream is to capture the legendary *Blue Morpho* butterfly, found only in tropical rainforests, and very similar to the one painted in the previous illustration. Pete's mother does everything she can to make his dream come true, convincing the noted entomologist Alan Osborne (William Hurt) to travel to the forest with the boy. Together they go in search of the mythical insect. The film begins with the boy asking: *Why me? Why do I have to die now?* The boy's motivation in capturing blue butterfly is revealed in the entomologist's declaration that it is the most beautiful creature he has ever seen, and that the mysteries of the world can be discovered just by looking at it. In the end, the boy catches the butterfly, and decides to let it fly away, so that one day he may join it and find similar freedom.

*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is a book written in 1997 by journalist Jean-Dominique Bauby, adapted for cinema by Julian Schnabel in 2007. The film tells the true story of a successful journalist and editor of *Elle*, who suffers a stroke at the age of 43. As a result of this attack,

Jean-Dominique develops a rare condition known as locked-in syndrome, leaving him totally paralyzed and able to move his left eye only. Bauby has to learn to live in this state, and, by using a method developed by a hospital therapist that allows him to communicate through blinking his eye, dictates a book. The title expresses what it was like to live inside a heavy diving suit, with limited vision, pulling him into the abyss, describing the life of a man who is a prisoner in his own body. In the book he refers to his left eye as his only link with the outside, the only breathing vent in his cell, and therefore the visor of his diving suit. At the same time, Bauby develops another perception of life, as the family, love and all that he was in the process of losing served as an incentive to communicate and explore his memory and imagination, like a freed butterfly trying to fly through space and time.

## DISCUSSION

Following a reading of the works of the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the explanation for the presence of butterflies in palliative care becomes more evident. This author is a major figure in the area of palliative care and left behind a huge professional legacy, including the practice of human care for terminally ill patients and the importance of unconditional love. In her book *A morte: um amanhecer*, the author states that the moment of death is composed of three stages, and that the death of the human body is a similar process to what happens when a butterfly leaves the cocoon. In this analogy, the cocoon can be compared to the human body, and is not representative of the true self as it is only a temporary abode.<sup>17</sup>

Kubler-Ross<sup>17</sup> states that, in the first stage, the human being still requires a functioning brain and active conscience to communicate with others. Once this brain, or this cocoon, is damaged, the



individual no longer has an active conscience. The moment when this process comes to an end, or in other words, when the “cocoon” reaches a condition in which it is no longer able to breathe, or the measuring of brain waves or taking of a pulse is no longer possible, is when the butterfly has left the cocoon. The psychiatrist points out that this does not mean that the human being has died, but that the cocoon has ceased to function. Whatever the cause of death, as soon as the cocoon is in an irreparable condition, it will release the butterfly: the soul. Having thus left the cocoon, we have reached the second stage. Here, now that the butterfly has left the body, it is fed by psychic energy, having previously been nourished by physical energy. With death, the link between the cocoon and the butterfly has been definitively broken and a return to the earthly body is no longer possible. The third stage is reached when the patient has a vision of his own life, from the first to the last moment. At this level, the psychiatrist claims that one no longer possesses consciousness of the first stage, or perception of the second.

In another book by the same author, *The Tunnel and the Light: Essential Reflections On Life and Death*, Kubler-Ross uses simple, everyday language in conversation with dying children, and uses the example of the cocoon and the butterfly as an analogy for the body and soul, respectively. In May 1978, the psychiatrist wrote a letter to a child of nine, called Dougy. The letter was in response to the question submitted by the child, “What is life and what is death, and why do little children have to die?” At the end of the book, the author published her answer to Dougy, in which she describes the relationship between the cocoon and the butterfly:<sup>18</sup>

*When we have done all the work we were sent to earth to do – we are allowed to shed our body – which imprisons our soul like a cocoon encloses the future butterfly – and when the time is right we can let go of it and we will be free of pain, free of fears and worries – free as a very beautiful butterfly, returning home to God which is a*

*place where we are never alone – where we continue to grow and to sing and dance, where we are with those we loved (who shed their cocoons earlier) and where we are surrounded with more love than you can ever imagine!!*

The author’s thinking in making the symbolic comparison between the cocoon and the butterfly is that the breaking of the cocoon represents the death of the body, with the soul coming to life and achieving freedom in the image of a butterfly. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s autobiography entitled *The Wheel of Life: A Memoir of Living and Dying* also features a butterfly on the cover. The author describes important moments in her personal and professional life. In one of the chapters of this book, the author tells of her visit to Maidanek, one of Hitler’s most notorious death camps, where she observed the names, initials and drawings that people had marked on the walls. Without knowing what tools were used to make the drawings, she noticed that one of the most common designs in the rooms where men, women and children spent their last nights before dying in the gas chambers was the butterfly.<sup>19</sup>

Twenty-five years later, in a flash of insight, she realized that the prisoners were like terminal patients, who knew what was going to happen to them. They understood that soon would become butterflies. When they died, they would be free from their prison and no longer tortured, separated from their families or sent to the gas chambers. Everything related to that life would have no importance and they would leave their bodies the same way as a butterfly leaves its cocoon. This became the image that the author would use for the rest of her professional career to explain the process of death and dying. Kübler-Ross<sup>19</sup> ends the book with the following personal statement:

*Death itself is a wonderful and positive experience, but the process of dying, when it is prolonged like mine, is a nightmare. It saps all your faculties, especially patience, endurance and equanimity. Throughout 1996, I*

*struggled with the constant pain and imitations of my paralysis. I am dependent on 24 hour care. (...) What kind of life is this? A miserable one. In January 1997, the time of this writing, I can honestly say that I am anxious to graduate. I am very weak, in constant pain and totally dependent. (...) Right now, I am learning patience and submission. As difficult as these lessons are, I know that the Highest of the High has a plan. I know that he has a time that will be right for me to leave my body like a butterfly leaves its cocoon.*

Therefore, death has numerous meanings. It can be considered the absolute end of something positive, the perishable and destructible aspect of existence, that which disappears into the irreversible evolution of life. Or it can be understood as liberation from worry and pain, and not an end in itself, as it opens up access to the realm of the spirit, the true life, a new life.<sup>8</sup>

Through a questionnaire entitled *Why is the butterfly our symbol of Palliative Care?*, The Cancer Foundation revealed that the butterfly is the symbol of palliative care as it lives a short time. But in that short time, it pollinates plants, beautifies nature and makes people happy. It is an example that life is not measured just by time but also by intensity. It was an initiative to raise awareness of World Day of Palliative Care, held in October.

The transitions in the life of a human being, like the metamorphosis of a butterfly, depending on their degree of severity, will usually be accompanied by fluctuating feelings of loss, sadness and fear, as well as expectations, hopes and desires, that go beyond the need for psychological and spiritual adjustment from one phase to the other.<sup>20</sup> In one form or another, people who are in palliative care and the elderly live within the proximity of death.

## CONCLUSION

While the moth can appear to be more related to bad omens, butterflies are most often considered as a symbol of something good and beautiful. Whether yellow, blue, red, lilac or multicolored, different meanings are assigned to this insect according to the beliefs and culture of each people. The white butterfly, however, is always most associated with the idea of the soul.

Thus, it can be considered that palliative care, in its theoretical philosophy and applied practice, assists and comforts this process of change in the lives of patients and families, until the butterfly leaves its cocoon and achieves freedom, in a symbolic representation symbolic of the soul and the body.

It should be noted that no intention was made in the present study to establish religious positions surrounding the butterfly symbol. However, the presence of butterflies was intriguing enough to seek more in-depth information about its symbolism and relationship with palliative care. In this way the scholarly view of butterfly symbolism was maintained, especially in relation to the association between its metamorphosis and the transformation of human life, most notably during the dying process.

The concept of finitude is common, or even concurrent, to both palliative care and old age. Therefore the symbolism behind something that seems trivial and purely decorative reflects a fundamental human dimension, which should not be overlooked in the treatment of cancer victims and elderly patients. Discussion of the possibility of renewal, however, is not to deny death, nor the pain and suffering of diseases such as cancer.

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Received: Dec 17, 2014

Revised: June 04, 2015

Accepted: June 26, 2015