

EMBODIMENT AND THE TASTE FOR LIFE: EXISTENTIAL STRATEGIES IN HOME ENTERAL NUTRITION

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Background: Eating is a fundamental human practice through which people relate to themselves, others and the world. In contexts of illness, however, eating may become mediated by biomedical technologies that profoundly transform bodily experience and social life.

Objective: This paper examines the embodied experience of eating among adults undergoing home enteral nutrition therapy (HENT), drawing on interviews with patients and family caregivers to explore how feeding through a tube is lived, negotiated and incorporated into everyday life.

Subjects and methods: The study involved 10 adults with oesophageal cancer undergoing home enteral nutrition therapy and their family caregivers in southern Brazil. Data from semi-structured interviews and field observations were analysed using interpretive thematic analysis informed by phenomenology, embodiment, and the anthropology of the body. The study examines eating not only as a physiological process but also as a sensory, moral, and relational practice through which individuals create meaning and maintain social connections.

Results: Interpretive thematic analysis generated four interconnected themes that illuminate how patients and caregivers negotiate bodily disruption, identity and care through everyday feeding practices. Findings reveal that HENT is experienced through a dynamic interplay of suffering, adaptation and resistance. Participants mobilize existential strategies such as religiosity, hope, humour, compassion and shared caregiving practices to preserve a sense of continuity and maintain what many described as a “taste for life.” At the same time, the feeding tube may be experienced as a threat to identity, autonomy and bodily integrity, generating feelings of loss, guilt, repugnance and refusal. These experiences expose tensions between biomedical norms and the lived realities of illness, highlighting the moral and affective dimensions of technological care.

Conclusion: By foregrounding eating as an embodied and intercorporeal experience, the paper contributes to anthropological debates on health, illness and care. It argues that Home Enteral Nutrition is not simply a nutritional technology but a social and existential practice through which bodies, identities and relationships are continually reconfigured.

Keywords: Embodiment; Medical anthropology; Intercorporeality; Care; Home enteral nutrition.

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