

**Title: Abstract:** Neglected: Experiences and Needs of South African Widowed Fathers due to Breast Cancer.

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### **Introduction:**

Literature and research indicate that the death of a mother negatively affects the remaining spouse and the child (or children). This particularly vulnerable subset of bereaved fathers and families are compelled to make critical adjustments psychologically, emotionally, logistically, socially, financially and parentally. Although some research has been done on bereaved fathers' experiences and navigation of their parental role subsequent to the death of the mother of their children, we know very little about South African fathers' experiences, challenges and needs. The purpose of my larger study, therefore, was to generate more knowledge about this group of fathers with the view to inform adequate support for them. This paper will specifically focus on what I have learnt about this special population of bereaved fathers' experiences and needs from the fathers that I interviewed so far.

### **Research Question:**

What are the experiences and needs of widowed fathers in South Africa whose partner died from breast cancer?

### **Materials and Method:**

**Study design:** Qualitative study design, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule.

**Setting and Sampling:** Recruitment settings included various private oncology practices. Purposive sampling allowed for the recruitment of 17 eligible fathers nationally. Participating fathers were representative of different socioeconomic status and income levels.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:** Inclusion criteria: (i) South African widowed fathers with age-dependent child/ren who have lost their partner and mother of their children due to cancer-related death over the past two years; (ii) living with, and parenting, his age-dependent children and, (iii) who are able to express themselves in Afrikaans or English. The two-year period is selected because the adjustment and challenges of fatherhood in the wake of the loss of the partner/mother are likely to be most pertinent in this timeframe.

Exclusion criteria: (i) Non South African widowed fathers, (ii) widowed fathers due to non-cancer related deaths, and (iii) More than two years since mother's death.

**Data collected:** Data was collected over a 25 month period (February 2022 – May 2024). Prior to data collection and audio recording, all participants signed an informed consent form. Data (English and Afrikaans) was collected by the researcher (first author) through in-person interviews and digital platforms such as teams and zoom which lasted on average 1.5 hours per interview.

**Data analysis:** Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

**Ethical considerations:** The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University, Project number 22160.

**Results:** The following themes pertaining to needs of widowed fathers emerged: (i) The need for perceptive and discerning prognostic communication from clinicians, (ii) the need for regular dependable psychological and emotional support as grief intensity and depressive symptomology continue to present two years, and longer, post-bereavement, (iii) the need for parental and social support especially from other fathers/men but also from professional health care workers, and (iv) the need for logistical and financial support.

**Conclusions:** Widowed fathers and their children need longer-term, consistent support after the passing of their partner to assist them in navigating a radically altered personal and family landscape. Such support could assist in reducing stress and minimise an increased risk in the children of bereaved fathers for possible adverse effects e.g., depression, anxiety (separation-anxiety), poor academic performance and somatic complaints to name a few.

