
THE PREPARATION OF ONCOLOGY NURSES IN PALLIATIVE CARE

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OBJECTIVES: *To address the opportunities for oncology nurses to prepare for and provide palliative care support to cancer patients and families.*

DATA SOURCES: *A review of the literature as well as synthesis of the experiences of the End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium over the past 10 years (2000-2010) were considered in summarizing implications for palliative care education in oncology.*

CONCLUSION: *Cancer patients and their families across the cancer trajectory experience serious physical and psychosocial symptoms and spiritual concerns. Oncology nurses have contributed to the evolving field of palliative care, and the continued education of oncology nurses in this specialty is essential to quality care for patients and families.*

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING PRACTICE: *The need for palliative care in oncology will intensify in the future, and effective strategies for education are necessary to prepare the nursing workforce for the effective and compassionate care that patients and families deserve.*

KEY WORDS: *Palliative care, oncology nurses, quality of life.*

CASE STUDY

SANDY has been an oncology nurse for the past 6 years. She describes her work in a busy oncology clinic as “the best.” She considers it a privilege to work with

people during some of their most vulnerable times. Sandy drives home every night from the clinic knowing that she has made a difference in the lives of her oncology patients and families. She has provided excellent patient teaching, analyzed blood work and other critical tests before giving

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chemotherapy, administered chemotherapy safely, and has documented all work appropriately and skillfully. However, she finds herself uncomfortable when her patients with very aggressive tumors confide in her that they know they will eventually succumb to their disease or when they talk about uncontrolled pain and symptoms. When she sees her patients' quality of life decrease, she does not know how to address it, because it "always seems sad." Although Sandy says she and her oncologist colleague, Dr. Miller, work closely together to manage pain and symptoms, she knows that they both could use more education in this area. She knows that many of her patients suffer not only physically, but also psychologically and spiritually. A palliative care clinic opened next to their oncology office a month ago. The palliative care nurse practitioner, Brian, will be coming over later this week to talk to Sandy and Dr. Miller and share the services provided by the palliative care team. Sandy states, "I really don't know what palliative care is."

PALLIATIVE CARE AS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF ONCOLOGY NURSING

Throughout the history of oncology as a nursing specialty, oncology nurses have been devoted to providing excellent care to their patients. Whether they are helping to manage nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy, intractable fatigue from radiation, or permanent physical scars left by surgery, oncology nurses have long been known for their impeccable care to cancer patients throughout the trajectory of their illness. Because of the efforts of oncology nurses, patients with cancer have received many elements of palliative care, including attention to pain, other physical and psychological symptoms, ethical decision making, and emotional, spiritual, and bereavement support. However, over the past decade, as the specialty of palliative care has advanced, oncology nursing is challenged with incorporating the advances of this care into education and practice. True integration of palliative care into routine cancer care is a reality in some settings. However, it remains a goal for most oncology settings, as the case study above shows. In a recent study, most oncology nurses could not distinguish the difference between palliative care and hospice and thought that only patients nearing death should receive palliative care.¹ Changing systems of care and

improving patient care to integrate palliative care into oncology nursing are contingent on the adequate preparation of oncology nurses.

STATUS OF PALLIATIVE CARE EDUCATION IN ONCOLOGY NURSING

As defined by the National Consensus Project for Quality Care, palliative care is focused on ensuring relief of symptoms and improving quality of life for those facing serious and life-limiting illness.² Over the past 2 decades numerous studies have documented deficiencies in nursing education as it relates to palliative care.³⁻¹³ These studies have shown that information on palliative care has been missing from undergraduate and graduate nursing textbooks. Most nursing faculty and continuing education providers are not prepared to teach this content. Nursing students and practicing nurses have few mentors in palliative care.^{3-5,8,12} However, the recognition of these issues from the 1990s to the present has resulted in a positive response by the nursing community.⁵⁻¹³ There has been significant effort at each level of nursing education to address and incorporate palliative care content into didactic and clinical courses.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

In 2003, the National Cancer Institute funded a 5-year training grant to the End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium (ELNEC) to develop and implement a curriculum specific to oncology nursing. Over the 5 years of the project, national ELNEC faculty taught train-the-trainer courses to 264 oncology nurses, representing 141 of 222 (64%) of Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) local chapters. Participants included staff nurses, nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, researchers, and undergraduate and graduate faculty. These oncology nurses worked in clinics, in-patient units, home care, hospices, and universities. The goal of this project was to provide the train-the-trainer course to representatives of each ONS chapter, so that they could return to their communities and teach other chapter members and institutional colleagues the importance of palliative care. These oncology nurses are uniquely prepared to address the needs of patients who are facing life-threatening illnesses, as they continue to serve in leadership roles in clinical, education, research, and administration.

Table 1 summarizes some of the key aspects needed for palliative care education in oncology.

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