



## **HPNA Position Statement**

### **Value of the Nursing Assistant in Palliative Care**

#### **Background**

Nursing assistants are essential members of the palliative healthcare team and, as such, they play a central role in providing care to patients and families coping with serious or life-threatening illness. Other interdisciplinary team members rely on hospice and palliative nursing assistants (also referred to as hospice aides in Medicare certified hospice programs) for their observations and reports in developing and implementing the plan of care for patients and their families.

The nursing assistant assumes primary responsibility for providing personal care and assisting patients with activities of daily living (ADLs). Nursing assistants practice within a variety of palliative care settings including long-term care, acute care, and patients' homes. In some of these settings, nursing assistants provide up to 90% of hands-on patient care.<sup>1</sup>

Because of their intense, consistent, and frequent interactions with patients and families, nursing assistants may be the first providers to observe the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual symptoms common to patients experiencing serious or life-threatening illness. Nursing assistants witness and experience the profound multiple losses and grief which accompany the dying process and the loss of loved ones.

Hospice and palliative nursing assistants are integral members of the interdisciplinary team and provide comprehensive physical, psychological, social, and spiritual care within their knowledge and skills,<sup>2</sup> in addition to all functions permissible by state law. The attitudes of nursing assistants towards certain therapies, such as administration of opioids and artificial nutrition, are communicated either directly or indirectly to patients and families; therefore, nursing assistants must be educated about reasons for implementing, changing, stopping, or removing therapies. In addition, they must be encouraged to reflect on and understand how their beliefs and values may impact patients and families. Nursing assistants must be informed about the decision-making processes for patients in their care so they can support and reinforce the patient's plan of care.

Nursing assistants can contribute substantially to both treatment planning and implementation of the care plan. Yet their expertise in observing and reporting relevant patient and family information and providing hands-on personal care is not consistently recognized across settings. In order to be actively involved in planning and providing quality palliative care, nursing assistants need to possess a thorough knowledge of palliative care concepts and practices. In addition, their experience and insights must be recognized and validated by the interdisciplinary team.<sup>3</sup> Nursing assistants who are educated and involved in the team care planning process experience greater job satisfaction, which may in turn decrease job turnover that threatens the quality and consistency of end-of-life care.<sup>4</sup>

Many nursing assistants are deeply committed to their work in palliative care and strive to maintain a very high standard of care. However, nursing assistants frequently receive low wages and have burdensome workloads.<sup>5</sup> Lack of appreciation and respect also contribute to job dissatisfaction and turnover.<sup>3,6-8</sup> Nursing assistants often feel personally and professionally dismissed.<sup>3</sup> These factors negatively influence the quality of palliative care as well as patient and family satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> Opportunities for advancement and professional growth have been suggested as remedies to this dilemma in healthcare.<sup>9</sup>

In recognition and support of their unique and important role in providing palliative care, the Hospice and Palliative Credentialing Center (HPCC) provides hospice and palliative nursing assistants the opportunity to achieve certification. Such certification verifies the mastery of the key knowledge and skills required for performance as a palliative nursing assistant. HPCC is the only certification body that offers specialty certification for nursing assistants along with offering a *Certified Hospice and Palliative Nursing Assistant of the Year Award*.<sup>10</sup>

The Hospice and Palliative Nurses Foundation (HPNF) offers certification scholarships, HPNA-sponsored conference scholarships, and educational scholarships for nursing assistants.<sup>11</sup>

The Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association (HPNA) includes nursing assistants as valued members. As a professional nursing organization, HPNA is unique in its inclusion of nursing assistants in its membership as well as its recognition of the specialized skills and the clinical contributions of nursing assistants providing palliative care. HPNA is the only nursing specialty organization that offers continuing education for nursing assistants.

### **Position Statement**

- Nursing and healthcare organizations recognize that care provided by nursing assistants is critical to achieving established goals of care for patients with serious or life-threatening illness and their families.
- Registered nurses recognize that nursing assistants are a vital and important member of the palliative care team. Nursing assistants deliver

- care that assists the professional nurse in accomplishing the patient and family's goals and plan of care.
- Healthcare institutions and organizations ensure that nursing assistants in all settings receive adequate educational preparation as well as continuing education to care for patients with serious or life-threatening illnesses and their families.
  - Nurses and administrators in all palliative care settings advocate for and insure the inclusion of nursing assistants as key members of the interdisciplinary team who are valued and deserving of competitive wages.
  - Specialty certification of the hospice and palliative nursing assistant is a means for recognition and advancement of this essential component of the palliative interdisciplinary team.
  - Persons developing policies, procedures and protocols ensure the role of the nursing assistant in palliative care is consistent with; individual state nurse practice acts, the *Statement on the Scope and Standards for Hospice and Palliative Nursing Assistant Practice*, and *Hospice and Palliative Nursing Assistant Competencies*.

## Definition of Terms

*Hospice Aides:* The term now used to define “nursing assistants” in the *Hospice Conditions of Participation*.<sup>12</sup>

*Nursing Assistant:* Nursing assistants assist individuals with healthcare needs with activities of daily living (ADLs) and provide bedside care – including basic nursing procedures – all under the supervision of a registered nurse (RN) or licensed practical/vocational nurse (LP/VN) according to regulatory boards as applicable.

*Palliative Care:* Patient and family-centered care that optimizes quality of life by anticipating, preventing, and treating suffering. Palliative care throughout the continuum of illness involves addressing physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual needs and to facilitate patient autonomy, access to information, and choice.<sup>13, p. 9</sup>

*Nursing:* The protection, promotion, and optimization of health and abilities, prevention of illness and injury, alleviation of suffering through the diagnosis and treatment of human response, and advocacy in the care of individuals, families, communities, and populations.<sup>14</sup>

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This position statement reflects the bioethics standards or best available clinical  
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To advance expert care in serious illness**