



HPNA Position Statement Value of the Professional Nurse in Palliative Care

Background

Nursing is based in caring and respect for human dignity. Since 1999 when nurses were first included in Gallup Surveys, Americans have consistently identified nurses as the most ethical and honest profession every year, except in 2001 when firefighters assumed this position related to the 9/11 events.¹ As members of the largest healthcare profession, nurses have long advocated for attention to quality of life throughout the lifespan, including end of life. “Nurses are leading palliative care programs across settings of care.”², p.xiii

Palliative care evolved from the concept of hospice care which predates the Middle-ages; however palliative nursing care began to emerge as professional nursing specialty in the 1970’s with the initiation of a hospice nurse curriculum by Florence Wald and the later significant contributions of Jeanne Quint Benoliel and Betty Ferrell. The work of these nurse leaders forged the way toward current standards of practice for comprehensive and compassionate care through the end of life.

Scientific and clinical knowledge and skills to assess and manage multiple symptoms, communication (particularly related to death and dying), application of ethical principles and working effectively within organizations have been identified as essential palliative competencies.^{3,4}

Palliative nurses achieve these competencies through a holistic, individualized approach that combines the science and the art of professional nursing care: the science of evidence-based nursing practice, expert assessment, symptom management, and critical thinking, along with the art of compassion, openness, mindfulness, and skillful communication. The outcome is quality of life for patients and families with serious or life-threatening illness, consistent with the goals of the patient and family that are exemplified by comfort, autonomy, dignity, and healing of body, mind, and spirit.

Competent, patient/family-centered palliative nursing practice uses a professional knowledge base, guided by a Code of Ethics, to support ethical decision-making.^{5,6,7} Patients and families coping with the effects of serious or life-threatening

illness often face difficult decisions related to treatment options, including discontinuation of non-beneficial treatments. They value the nurses' knowledge, compassion, and communication. With these skills, the palliative nurse is in a position to convey a sense of respect, trust, and confidence at a time when patients and families are feeling vulnerable.⁸

When faced with serious illness, people turn to professional nurses for education, support, and guidance. Nurses are expert in coordinating the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual aspects of care. They are ideal providers to ensure continuity of care across various settings such as hospitals, homes, long-term care facilities, schools, and prisons and life stages, from pre-natal through death.

Professional nurses play a leading role as members of palliative care and hospice teams across the continuum of care.⁹ Unfortunately, supply and demand models coupled with projected changes in the population predict a significant shortage of between 725,000 and 1.1 million professional nurses by 2030, underscoring the importance of preparing nurses for the future.¹⁰ They are the primary team members who assess, direct, evaluate, and coordinate patient care needs during the illness experience.

The professional nurse is also key in guiding the entire healthcare team to recognize serious or life-threatening situations and to provide the specialized comfort care and psychological support patients need in those situations.¹¹ Professional palliative care nursing is grounded in the positive traditions of past practices while shaping care for the future to meet the evolving needs of chronically ill and dying patients. The professional nurse establishes and supports the methods and means to respond to these changing needs within organizations and communities.

Position Statement

- Competent professional nursing care is critical to achieving healthcare goals of patients, families, communities, and populations through the end of life.
- The increased demand for specialty nursing care within a complex healthcare system requires nurses who possess leadership skills to meet the need for expanding roles, responsibilities, and education. Registered nurses who practice in palliative care are encouraged to seek certification in their specialty through the Hospice and Palliative Credentialing Center (HPCC). Palliative Nurses are further encouraged to be active members of their professional organization; the Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association (HPNA).
- Support for hospice and palliative care research and education is necessary to ensure that care is evidence-based, appropriate, effective, and will meet future healthcare needs.
- Palliative nursing can serve as a model for addressing the needs of the chronically ill.

- Hospice and palliative nurses should provide input for policies by serving on local, state, and national health care advisory boards and committees.

Definition of Terms

Palliative care: Patient and family-centered care that optimizes the 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.^{12,13,14}

Palliative nursing practice: evidence-based nursing practice that includes¹⁵ “the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of human responses to actual or potential life-limiting illnesses within the context of a dynamic caring relationship with the patient and family, in order to reduce or relieve suffering and optimize health.”⁸

Professional nurse: A registered nurse who: protects, promotes, and optimizes the health and abilities of his or her patients; prevents illness and injury, alleviates suffering, and identifies diagnoses and treats the human response to suffering; advocates for individuals, families, communities, and populations.^{16, p.8}

Critical thinking: A process of utilizing cognitive skills to analyze, apply standards, discriminate, seek information/data, reason logically, predict and transform knowledge. Critical thinkers exhibit habits of the mind: confidence, contextual perspective, creativity, flexibility, inquisitiveness, intellectual integrity, intuition, open-mindedness, perseverance, and reflection.¹⁷

Evidence-based practice: "The conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of the individual patient. It means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research."¹⁸ Evidence-based nursing practice critically evaluates the evidence in conjunction with nursing theory, clinical expertise, and the patient's values and preferences to deliver optimum nursing care.¹⁹

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