

Discussing Death, Dying, and End-of-Life Goals of Care: A Communication Skills Training Module for Oncology Nurses

Nessa Coyle, PhD, APRN, FAAN, Ruth Manna, MPH, Megan Johnson Shen, PhD, Smita C. Banerjee, PhD, Stacey Penn, BSN, RN, OCN®, Cassandra Pehrson, MSW, Carol A. Krueger, MS, LCSW, Erin K. Maloney, PhD, Talia Zaider, PhD, and Carma L. Bylund, PhD



© Susan Chiang/iStock

Background: Effective communication, particularly at the end of life, is an essential skill for oncology nurses, but few receive formal training in this area.

Objectives: The aim of this article is to adapt an end-of-life care communication skills training (CST) module, originally developed for oncologists, for oncology nurses and to evaluate participants' confidence in using the communication skills learned and their satisfaction with the module.

Methods: The adapted end-of-life care module consisted of a 45-minute didactic, exemplary video and 90 minutes of small group interaction and experiential role play with a simulated patient. Using a five-point Likert-type scale, 247 inpatient oncology nurses completed pre-/post-workshop surveys rating their confidence in discussing death, dying, and end-of-life goals of care with patients, as well as overall satisfaction with the module.

Findings: Nurses' confidence in discussing death, dying, and end-of-life goals of care increased significantly after attending the workshop. Nurse participants indicated satisfaction with the module by agreeing or strongly agreeing to all six items assessing satisfaction 90%–98% of the time. Nurses' CST in discussing death, dying, and end-of-life care showed feasibility, acceptability, and potential benefit at improving confidence in having end-of-life care discussions.

Nessa Coyle, PhD, APRN, FAAN, is a consultant, Ruth Manna, MPH, is the manager of the Comskil Program, Megan Johnson Shen, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow, Smita C. Banerjee, PhD, is an assistant attending behavioral scientist, Stacey Penn, BSN, RN, OCN®, is a clinical nurse, Cassandra Pehrson, MSW, is a training assistant for the Comskil Program, and Carol A. Krueger, MS, LCSW, is a patient representative, all at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, NY; Erin K. Maloney, PhD, is the research director for the Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; Talia Zaider, PhD, is an assistant attending psychologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center; and Carma L. Bylund, PhD, is the associate director of medical education at the Hamad Medical Corporation in Doha, Qatar. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article. The study was supported, in part, by funding from the Geri and ME Fund, Memorial Sloan Kettering Nursing Education, the Fridolin Charitable Trust, and a grant (T32-CA009461) from the National Cancer Institute. The content of the article has been reviewed by independent peer reviewers to ensure that it is balanced, objective, and free from commercial bias. No financial relationships relevant to the content of the article have been disclosed by the independent peer reviewers or editorial staff. Coyle can be reached at nessacoyle@aol.com, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org. (Submitted January 2015. Revision submitted April 2015. Accepted for publication April 6, 2015.)

Key words: death; dying; end-of-life care; nurse–patient communication; transitions in goals of care; communication skills; training

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/15.CJON.697-702

Despite nurses' centrality in the process of the healthcare team communicating with patients, few receive formal education specific to communication, particularly related to end-of-life care (Chant, Jenkinson, Randle, & Russell, 2002; Kruijver, Kerstra, Bensing, & van de Wiel, 2000; Vydellingum, 2006). However, nurses rank communication as one of the most important competencies to their practice (McCabe, 2004; McGilton, Irwin-Robinson, Boscart, & Spanjevic, 2006). Although nurses

generally feel confident in providing care for the physical needs of patients with cancer, they find addressing the patients' emotional concerns to be more difficult (Rask, Jensen, Andersen, & Zachariae, 2009). These reported difficulties in communication exist among hospice nurses as well (Ellington et al., 2008; Ellington, Reblin, Clayton, Berry, & Mooney, 2012).

Nurses' communication skills are crucial to patient care because they provide much of the care and support to patients and their families throughout the disease trajectory. Nurses