

Palliative Care for Older People

Key Statement

Nurses provide care for older people across a diverse range of settings (hospital, home, residential aged care and respite services). It is now recognised that palliative care is core business for aged care services and nurses caring for older people. All nurses, regardless of setting, require comprehensive aged, palliative care and advance care planning knowledge and skills in order to support older people and their families or carers.

Background

Palliative Care Nurses Australia Inc. (PCNA) is a national member-based organisation for nurses working with people who are living and dying from progressive illnesses and their families. The vision of PCNA is to promote excellence in palliative care nursing for our community, through leadership, representation and professional support. The World Health Organisation (2002) definition of palliative care underpins our work.

Australia has an ageing population. Currently around 1.3 million older people have received some form of aged care government assistance. Of these 239,379 were cared for in a Residential Aged Care Facility (RACF) and 91,847 received a Home Care Support Package (AIHW 2018). Many of these older Australians will require palliative care but not all who need it will be able to access the care required.

Palliative Care Nurses Australia believes that nurses providing palliative care to older people should:

- provide leadership in the area of palliative aged care;
- deliver care that is competent, ethical and evidence based;
- be skilled in impeccable assessment and management of the physical, psychological, socio-cultural, emotional and spiritual needs of the older person and their family in accordance with the best available evidence;
- use a team approach to address the needs of older people and their families including bereavement needs;
- support research and education to ensure care is evidence based, best practice and will meet future needs; and
- engage in innovation and quality activities to support new models of care and service delivery to meet the palliative care needs of older people and their families.

In order to address these needs, the following recommendations are made:

- In the residential aged care setting, there is an urgent need to:
 - ensure that at a minimum that there is a registered nurse on duty 24 hours per day;
 - legislate skill mix so that there are the required number of registered nurses with the appropriate education, capabilities and skills to manage the increasingly complex needs of older people living in this setting; and

- increase the number of Nurse Practitioners who can assist aged care nurses and general practitioners to provide the best evidenced based care to older people with aged-palliative care needs;
- Palliative care content and specifically the palliative care needs of the older person needs to be a mandatory in all vocational and undergraduate nursing education;
- That there be minimal palliative care educational requirements mandated for the residential and community aged care workforce, as summarised below:
 - Care Assistants: completion of a Certificate III, which includes palliative care content;
 - Enrolled Nurses: completion of specific dementia, aged care and/or palliative care content as part of their diploma;
 - Registered Nurses: Completion or working towards a Graduate Certificate (i.e. Palliative or Aged Care or a related area);
 - Clinical Nurse Specialist or Nursing Unit Manager: Completion of a Graduate Diploma (i.e. Palliative or Aged Care or a related area); and
 - Clinical Nurse Specialists and/or Directors of Nursing: Completion of a Master (i.e. Palliative Care, Gerontology or Management).
- That clinical networks be developed to support, mentor and build the capacity of nurses working in residential and community aged care services.

Conclusion

Nurses play an essential role in providing safe and supportive care to older people who require palliative care across a diverse range of settings. Nurses of all education levels should be appropriately skilled to provide evidenced-based palliative care to older people and their families.

Definitions

Palliative Care as defined by the World Health Organisation (2002) is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual.

Palliative care provides relief from pain and other distressing symptoms, and:

- affirms life and regards dying as a normal process;
- intends neither to hasten nor postpone death;
- integrates the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care;
- offers a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death;
- offers a support system to help the family cope during the patient's illness and in their own bereavement;
- uses a team approach to address the needs of patients and their families, including bereavement counselling, if indicated;
- will enhance quality of life, and may also positively influence the course of illness;

- is applicable early in the course of illness, in conjunction with other therapies that are intended to prolong life, such as chemotherapy or radiation therapy, and includes those investigations needed to better understand and manage distressing clinical complications.

Person living with a life-limiting illness as defined by the PCA Palliative Care Service Development Guidelines is used to describe illnesses where it is expected that death will be a direct consequence of the specified illness. Such illnesses may include, but are not limited to cancer, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, dementia, heart failure, neurodegenerative disease, chronic liver disease and renal disease.

The term person living with a life-limiting illness also incorporates the concept that people are actively living with such illnesses, often for long period of time, not simply dying.

Specialist Palliative Care Services as defined by the PCA Palliative Care Service Development Guidelines are multidisciplinary teams with specialised skills, competencies, experience and training in palliative care.

References:

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