An Interprofessional, Blended Learning Module on Palliative Care for Physician Assistant and Nurse Practitioner Students

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Introduction

Palliative care:
- An important component of addressing health care needs
- Is often overlooked
- Provides relief from pain and other symptoms
- Supports quality of life
- Focuses on patients with serious advanced illness and their families

Accreditation standard B2.06 requires PA curricula to include:
- Instruction in medical care across the life span
- Instruction in palliative and end-of-life care (EOLC)

PA programs generally provide little formal instruction in palliative care.

Purpose and objectives

Develop and implement an interprofessional learning module on palliative care and EOLC to enhance PA and NP students:
- Skills in communicating with patients regarding EOLC
- Comfort in discussing EOL decisions & care
- Knowledge of the importance of palliative care in improving quality of care at the EOL

Analysis

- Pre-module Likert-scale survey on knowledge, skills, and attitudes
- Post-module reflective essays to assess knowledge, attitude change, and confidence with EOLC communication
- Qualitative analysis by a faculty member who read the reflective essays completed at the end of the module to identify emerging themes

Materials and Methods

Pre-class:
- Selected readings
  - Dying in America: Improving quality and honoring individual preferences near the end of life. The National Academies Press, 2014
  - Oncotalk Learning Module 1: Fundamental Communication Skills, Medical Oncology Communication Skills Training, 2002, University of Washington
  - Three video presentations by the Center for Education in Palliative and End-of-Life Care (EPEC), Northwestern University
    - Communicating Difficult News
    - Pain Assessment and Management
  In-class:
    - Interprofessional class discussion and reflections between PA and NP students
    - Impact of unwanted, uncoordinated treatment

Results

Pre-instructional survey with questions on the following subjects

- Prior exposure to life-threatening disease or death
- Experienced death of a family, friend, or patient
- Comfort discussing EOL decisions & care
- Confidence in skills discussing EOL decisions & care

Emerging Themes

By the end of the module students:
- Recognized the importance of
  - Empathic communication with patients and families
  - Timely and effective communication on EOLC with patients and families
  - The effectiveness of the communication skills demonstrated in the Oncotalk Learning Module
- Developed increased confidence in the ability to have difficult conversations with patients facing life-threatening illness
- Recognized that confidence and comfort in having difficult conversations comes with experience and practice

Summary & Conclusions

- EOLC is a limited focus of PA education
- The majority (26/29) of the class reported the module increased their comfort level and confidence in discussion of EOLC
- This interprofessional module was successfully implemented in the existing curriculum without increased program cost or length

Recommendations

- The need for palliative care provided by PAs is expected to grow as the US population ages
- PA curricula can incorporate palliative care competencies using a blended approach
- This module will be replicated with future cohorts including learners from other health professions

References


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