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Abstract

Educational Approaches for Teaching Palliative Care to Health Care Providers

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Multiple studies from around the world reveal that health care providers are inadequately trained to treat cancer pain and deliver optimal end-of-life care. Reasons for the significant gap in palliative care education include a lack of faculty who are able and willing to teach, the inherent complexities and challenges of teaching palliative care attitudes, knowledge and skills, and not viewing palliative care as a healthcare priority. Discouraging results from such studies as the SUPPORT project in 1995, galvanized the medical community to improve palliative care education for physicians and nurses. Excellent palliative care curricula have since been developed around the world, many uniquely designed to meet the needs of specific palliative care populations. According to Weissman and Blust (2005), palliative care educational programs should address five domains: pain assessment and management; non-pain symptom assessment and management; communication skills, ethics and laws; psychosocial care; and general health system information. Designing an effective palliative care educational program involves conducting a needs assessment, constructing educational objectives based on learning “tension points,” matching the teaching method to the objective, and developing an evaluation plan. Specific educational methods can include case studies, small group discussion and role playing. It is important to use a variety of interactive teaching approaches, incorporate interdisciplinary instruction if possible, and facilitate clinical exposure to various palliative care settings and patients. Palliative care education is complex, and to be most effective must be individualized to meet the needs of the trainees and the population to be served.