
Palliative Care Communication

Outcomes from COMFORT™ SM, a train-the-trainer course for providers

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BACKGROUND: With increasing support for the integration of palliative care and standard oncology, communication training programs are needed to teach oncology nurses and other providers about palliative care communication.

OBJECTIVES: This study reports on the outcomes of COMFORT™ SM Communication for Oncology Nurses, a train-the-trainer communication course to educate oncology nurses about palliative care communication and improve patient-centered communication and cancer care.

METHODS: 355 oncology nurses attended the two-day course. This study used 6- and 12-month follow-up data from nurses who provided feedback on the progress of these goals.

FINDINGS: Nurses taught an additional 9,720 oncology providers, conducted needs assessments of communication processes, and initiated institutionwide palliative care communication training. Barriers to completing outcome goals included a lack of institutional support, specifically an absence of leadership, financial backing, and dedicated time.

KEYWORDS

communication/education training; nursing; oncology; palliative care

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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INCREASED DIVERSITY IN DIAGNOSES, MULTIMORBIDITY, and chronic illness add to the complexity of cancer care and demand the involvement of palliative care to ensure that patients' goals, preferences, and wishes are at the forefront of care planning (Aldridge & Bradley, 2017). Palliative care is specialized team-based care that focuses on providing the patient relief from symptoms and stress of illness (Get Palliative Care, 2019). Professional associations that represent oncology care providers support the integration of palliative care into standard oncology care. Palliative care in oncology improves quality of life and survival rates (Bakitas et al., 2017; Temel et al., 2010) and reduces symptom burden, financial burden, and emergency department visits for symptom management (Hallman & Newton, 2019). Despite these benefits, the number of patients with cancer needing palliative care far exceeds the number of palliative care providers available (Szekendi et al., 2018).

Because there are not enough palliative care providers to sustain the integration of palliative care concurrent with usual oncology (Bakitas et al., 2017), the presence of palliative care can be increased by non-palliative care providers, such as oncology nurses, who can engage patients and families in palliative care conversations (Szekendi et al., 2018). With an increasing focus on patient-centered and value-based health care, oncology nurses are ideally positioned to expand access to palliative care and more consistently deliver cancer care that honors patient and family preferences (Dailey, 2016; Szekendi et al., 2018). Reports of palliative care effectiveness demonstrate that palliative care can improve patient and family satisfaction and the experience of care, reduce days in the hospital, reduce 30-day readmissions, and, particularly toward the end of life, reduce the cost of care (Center to Advance Palliative Care, 2018).

The COMFORT™ SM Communication for Oncology Nurses training program is a National Cancer Institute (NCI)-supported project (R25CA174627) that educates oncology nurses to be a source of support and to provide resources to train providers in palliative care communication skills. COMFORT is an acronym that represents the seven basic principles of palliative care communication: communication, orientation and options, mindful communication, family, openings, relating, and team (Wittenberg-Lyles, Goldsmith, Ferrell, & Ragan, 2013). The purpose of this article is to present outcomes of the training program.