Nursing Care at the Time of Death: A Bathing and Honoring Practice

Debra Rodgers, BSN, RN, OCN®, CHPN, Beth Calmes, MSN, RN, and Jonathan Grotts, MA

According to statistics published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011), more than one-third of the population dies in acute care hospitals, and about 20% die in nursing homes. Nurses are the primary bedside healthcare providers in these settings, and they care for patients leading up to and at the time of death. Providing competent, compassionate care to patients and their families throughout the course of illness, including after a patient dies, is an important part of nurses’ work. Oncology nurses, in particular, are committed to providing the best possible care to their patients and patients’ families at end of life (Beckstrand, Collette, Callister, & Luthy, 2012).

Pattison (2008b, p. 55) described nursing care of the patient who has died as “the final act of caring” and stressed that families often have vivid memories of the events surrounding the death and the care given afterward. From...