The Degree to Which Spiritual Needs of Patients Near the End of Life Are Met

Carla P. Hermann, PhD, RN

Purpose/Objectives: To determine to what degree the spiritual needs of patients near the end of life are met.

Design: Descriptive.

Setting: One inpatient and five outpatient hospices.

Sample: 62 female and 38 male hospice patients with a mean age of 67 years; 74% were dying from cancer.

Methods: Each subject completed the Spiritual Needs Inventory and rated life satisfaction via the Cantril ladder.

Main Research Variables: Spiritual needs and life satisfaction.

Findings: Women, patients residing in a nursing home or an inpatient hospice unit, and patients with lower levels of education reported a higher number of unmet spiritual needs. Needs that could be met independently by patients and were not related to functional status were met at a higher rate than those that were dependent on others and on functional status.

Conclusions: Spiritual activities are important to patients who are near the end of life, but these patients may have a variety of unmet spiritual needs that depend on many factors, including the care setting.

Implications for Nursing: Nurses must recognize the importance of spirituality to patients near the end of life. Assessment for specific spiritual needs can lead to the development of interventions to meet those needs. Meeting patients’ spiritual needs can enhance their quality of life.

Background

Meaning of Spirituality

Interest in the concept of spirituality has increased recently. For many years, spirituality was equated with religion; however, researchers now recognize that spirituality is a broader concept and religion is subsumed under spirituality (Flannelly, Weaver, & Costa, 2004). Spirituality involves finding purpose and meaning in life (Taylor & Ferszt, 1990) and relates to a transcendent dimension (Reed, 1992). Spirituality is multidimensional in nature and involves individuals’ physical and psychosocial characteristics (Wright, 1998). In the current study, spirituality was defined as the inherent quality of all humans that activates and drives the search for meaning and purpose in life. Spirituality involves all aspects of individuals as experienced in relationships with self, others, and a transcendent dimension. A spiritual need is something required or wanted by an individual to find meaning and purpose in life. Everyone can be considered to be spiritual in nature and therefore have spiritual needs (Walter, 2002).

Literature Review

The beneficial effects of spirituality have been reported in numerous studies. Spiritual well-being has been negatively