Consolation in Conjunction With Incurable Cancer

Ulrica Langedard, RN, MSc, and Karin Ahlberg, RN, PhD

Improvements in medical treatment and increased life expectancy mean more people are enduring incurable chronic diseases. About 20,000 people die each year in Sweden from a variety of cancers and, at some point during the course of their disease progression, most of the patients require palliative care (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2005). Palliative care is care given to patients with symptoms originating from incurable disease or with a progressive disease with short expected survival. Palliative care is an active, comprehensive care model built on a clearly defined philosophy with an aim to create the requirements for quality of life (QOL) when a cure is no longer possible (Beck-Friis & Strang, 2005). Patients suffering from a life-threatening disease are in need of assistance to alleviate their distress.

Being stricken with an incurable disease is a traumatizing experience, and nurses often are the healthcare providers who console suffering patients. Consolation is a natural act and has always been part of care situations. One task of a nurse is to relieve suffering to bring about enhanced well-being. In the relationship between patient and healthcare provider, consolation is sparingly used as an intervention, although, through other care interventions, comfort could presumably be found in the daily interaction between nurse and patient.

The palliative phase at the end of life is generally short, a few months at the most. Psychological well-being in connection with end-of-life care is significant, and a sense of meaning and spiritual well-being is essential (Benzein, Norberg, & Saveman, 2001; Cohen & Leis, 2002; Sahlgberg Blom, Ternestedt, & Johansson, 2001). The suffering patient is in need of consolation. Suffering is alien to the patient and is seen as a threat to personal identity, integrity, and communion. Suffering disconnects patients from themselves, other people, the surrounding world, and spiritual meaning (Casell, 1991; Younger, 1995). Consolation is a vague concept within the nursing profession, possibly because consolation is such an everyday concept and such an obvious act that the literature scarcely addresses the topic. Several studies (e.g., Back-Petersson, 2006), however, have shown that nurses have little knowledge about consolation of incurable patients. The current study increases the knowledge of what patients with incurable cancer have...