



Challenges for nurses when communicating with people who have life-limiting illness and their families: a focus group study.

Debra Kerr¹, Sharyn Milnes², Peter Martin², Joan Ostaszewicz^{1,3}, Trisha Dunning^{1,3}

1. Deakin University, Centre for Quality and Patient Safety

2. Barwon Health

3. Barwon Health Partnership, School of Nursing and Midwifery

Introduction

Patient-centred communication has been linked to improved outcomes for patients with life-limiting illness (LLI). However, the literature predominantly focuses on nurses working in oncology and the medical profession. As they are likely to spend considerable time with patients and their families across a shift, they are in a strong position to develop strong rapport, an essential ingredient for effective communication. Therefore, understanding the challenges that nurses' experience when communicating with patients who have an LLI is imperative in the development of practice improvements.

Aim

The study aimed to answer the following question: What communication issues do nurses find challenging when caring for people with life-limiting illness?

Methods

- A qualitative descriptive design was used.
- Focus groups were conducted with 39 nurses from 3 wards at Barwon Health in 2019: Baxter 5 (n=13), Baxter 7 (n=15), & Palliative Care (McKellar) (n=11).
- An interview schedule was used.
- Data were analysed using thematic content analysis.

Results

Approximately half (43.6%) of the participants were aged 26 to 35 years. The majority were female (92.3%) and most were registered nurses (89.7%). Less than half (38.5%) had received some form of communication skills training after completing their undergraduate degree. In their view, nurses have the potential to develop a strong bond with patients and their families. Three key themes were identified – See Table.

Themes constructed from focus groups

Feeling unskilled to have difficult conversations with patients who have LLI	Absence of a communication toolkit and framework inhibits capacity to respond to difficult questions and gather information
	Dealing with heightened emotions
	Interactions are difficult when there is denial
Interacting with family members adds complexity to care of patients who have life limiting illness	Unrealistic and mismatched expectations
	Balancing relational dynamics with patient values and needs
Organisational factors impede nurses' capacity to have meaningful conversations with patients and their families	Inadequate degree of information
	Lack of time

Conclusion

Nurses report being hampered by time restraints and lack of information about the patient's condition and goals of care. Limitations in conversation structure and a comprehensive range of core communication skills affects their ability to confidently engage in conversations, particularly when they are responding to prognostic questions. Specific training may increase nurses' confidence and efficiency when communicating with patients and their families.



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