
Knowledge and attitude of nursing students towards palliative care: Role of focused training

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Abstract

Aim of the study: There is a mounting need for palliative care in India which is vital to contribute to the quality of life of patients. Care for terminally ill and dying patient requires the skill, knowledge and attitude in the field of palliative care for all the stake holders, more so for nurses who have a key role in caring for patients as they spend the maximum time with the patient than any other member of health professional. Hence training in palliative care must start in the early years of nursing education.

Methodology: A questionnaire based study was undertaken to assess the awareness and attitude of nursing students towards palliative care. The study also sensitized the students by conducting a structured workshop on different aspects of palliative care. Pre and post tests were conducted.

Results: The results indicated average to poor knowledge and attitude of palliative care in final year BSc nursing students which improved after the intervention of the workshop.

Conclusion: The study is suggestive that more specific, structured and focused inputs of handling terminally ill patients is required to be included in the curriculum of nursing.

Keywords: Nursing education, palliative care.

1. Introduction

Palliative care is defined by WHO as an approach which improves quality of life of patients and their families facing life threatening illness through prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems as physical, psychological and spiritual.[1]

Palliative care began in hospice movement. These hospices were originally places of rest for travelers in 4th century. The modern hospice movement was formed by Dame Cicely Saunders of England in 1967.[2]

Concept of palliative care is new in India, but the requirement is beyond our imagination. It is estimated that around 2.5 million people suffer from cancer at any given time in India. Almost 80% of patient reaches hospitals in advanced stages of disease. This has led to a mounting need for palliative care.[2]

Health professionals function largely within a culture that focuses on care, and many avoid the patient who is dying. It is therefore vital that all care practioners who have contact with people who are dying, including medical, allied health science and nursing are aware and apply the best principles of palliative care.[3]

Nurses are the most numerous health care providers in almost every country; they are often the primary care givers. Historically, nurses have been involved in the provision of palliative care. Though, nurses have played various roles in the development of palliative care, offering leadership, support and focus for the movement.[4-6] experiences of death on a clinical placement by nursing students was a major cause of anxiety and sadness.

However, despite this type of support for palliative care, nursing and a continued involvement in palliative care, nursing has lagged behind other disciplines in the development of palliative care nursing education curricula. This underdeveloped educational foundation has contributed to difficulties in defining the role of nurses in palliative care. With this in mind, the present questionnaire based study was carried out to assess the awareness of palliative care in nursing students and improve their knowledge and attitude towards end of life patients.

2. Material and Method:

A cross sectional questionnaire based study was conducted among final yr B.Sc. nursing students at VSPM College of Nursing and Research Centre, Nagpur. After obtaining ethics clearance, 33 students who agreed to participate in the study constituted the sample size. Verbal as well as written consent was obtained from the participants. Students were asked to fill a pre test questionnaire before the workshop in a class room setting. Data was collected by using a structured and validated questionnaire. The questionnaire had three parts. Section A: Demographic Performa consisted of age, gender and sources of information on palliative care. Section B: A validated structured questionnaire consisting of 19 multiple choice questions was developed to assess the knowledge on palliative care. Each correct response carried one mark.

Total score was 19. Knowledge scores were categorized into poor (0-5), average (6-10), good (11-15) and excellent (16 and above).

Section C: To assess the attitude of the students towards palliative care. It consisted of 3 questions.

A workshop of 3 hrs was conducted to sensitize the students about palliative care, its content and scope. The duration was divided into three sessions. Session 1 was about introduction to palliative care, history of hospice, the basic concept of levels of care which was conducted by a palliative care faculty from a NGO, which is regularly involved with end of life care in a cancer hospital. Session II which was conducted by a medical faculty and a psychologist dealt with the emotional and psychological aspects with palliative care which also included handling of difficult situations. The concluding session by Head of nursing department talked about roles and challenges that a nurse encounters during palliative care. After the workshop, the students were again asked to fill a post-test questionnaire. Questionnaire used thus provided us the information on age, gender, year of study, awareness of palliative care, and source of information, knowledge and attitude of the students towards end of life care. The questionnaire was evaluated by an expert in the field.

3. Result

Section A: Demographic data of students

The data presented in figure 1 and 2 shows that among 33 samples, the majorities (84.84%) were of age 21 years and most of them were females (87.87%).

Figure 1: Age wise distribution of participants

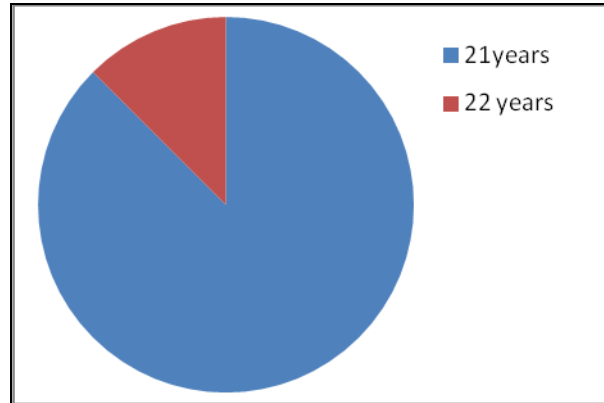
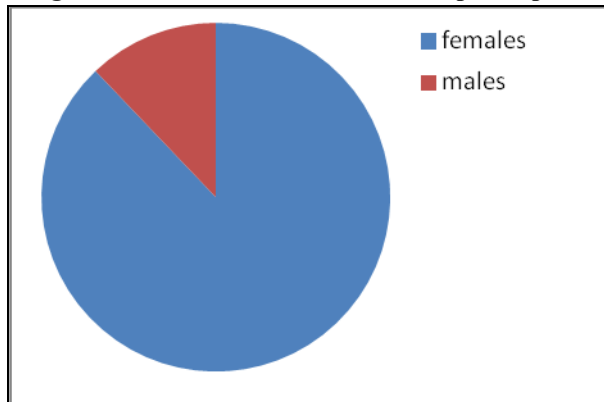


Figure 2: Gender wise distribution of participants



From Table 1, it appears that most of the students obtained information regarding palliative care from books (45.45%) and from discussion during training (33.33%) followed by other sources like television and internet. Also, all the students had heard about palliative care before.

Table 1: Source of information regarding palliative care

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Friend/relative received Palliative care	2	6.06
neighbor received palliative care	0	0
Friend/relative discussed it	0	0
Discussed during training	11	33.33
Television and internet	2	6.06
Newspapers and magazine	2	6.06
Books	15	45.45
Others	1	3.03
Total	33	100

Section B: Knowledge of students on palliative care

Table 2 shows that 48.48% of students had average knowledge prior to the workshop while 6.06% had good knowledge, whereas, 45.45% had poor knowledge. After the intervention, none of the students were with poor or average knowledge. It is understood from table 2 that 63.63% students had excellent knowledge after the workshop whereas 36.36% had comparatively good knowledge. These differences in percentage prior to and after the workshop reflects its impact.

Table 2: Knowledge of Students on Palliative Care

Category (Score)	Frequency (n=33)		Percentage (n=33)	
	Pretest	Post test	Pretest	Post test
Poor (0 - 5)	15	0	45.45	0
Average (6 - 10)	16	0	48.48	0
Good (11 - 15)	2	12	6.06	36.36
Excellent (16 and above)	0	21	0	63.63
Total	33		100	

Section C: Attitude assessment of students

According to data presented in table 3, 4 and 5; 84.84% of the students were willing to acquire more information on palliative care prior to the workshop, this went upto 100% after workshop. Initially, 75.75% believed that palliative care will help to comfort the patient whereas this increased to 87.87% in post-test. 54.54% were comfortable in approaching end of life patient for palliative care before and it increased to 81.81% after the workshop. This difference also shows the favorable change in attitude of the students.

Table 3: Attitude Assessment of the Students

On being asked about do they wish to have knowledge?

Response	Frequency (n=33)		Percentage (n=33)	
	Pretest	Post test	Pretest	Post test
Yes	28	33	84.84	100
No	2	0	6.06	0
Uncertain	2	0	6.06	0
Only if useful to me	1	0	3.03	0

Table 4: Attitude Assessment of the Students

Do they think that palliative care will help to comfort the patient?

Response	Frequency (n=33)		Percentage (n=33)	
	Pretest	Post test	Pretest	Post test
Yes	25	29	75.75	87.87
No	0	0	0	0
To some extent	7	4	21.21	12.12
Can't say	1	0	3.03	0

Table 5: Attitude Assessment of The Students

Are you comfortable in approaching end of life patient for palliative care?

Response	Frequency (n=33)		Percentage (n=33)	
	Pre test	Post test	Pretest	Post test
Yes	18	27	54.54	81.81
No	4	0	12.12	0
To some extent	5	4	15.15	12.12
Can't say	6	2	18.18	6.06

4. Discussion

Nurses are the basic care providers in all the health institutions. They carry out various tasks continuously, making their contributions to multidisciplinary palliative care team. Nursing graduates need to be prepared to take care of terminally ill patient at the gross root level.[7] A survey of medical students, residents, fellows, and attending physicians found that, there was lack of standardized training in dealing with terminally ill people.[8] Palliative care, despite its growing scientific base, is often perceived as not important. This attitude coalesce into practice patterns that tend to devalue the provision of palliative care even though there is an increasing need for humane medical care at the end of life.[9]

In the present study, 84.84% were of age group 21years and majorities (87.87%) were females. This correlates with a study done by Karkada *et al.*[7] and with another study by Daud *et al.*[8]

The major source of information in present study was found to be books (45.45) followed by discussion during training (33.33), television, internet(6.06), newspapers and magazine(6.06).In contrast to this, a study by Daud *et al* Lahore reported friends and relatives receiving palliative care (76%) to be popular source of information followed by television and internet (35%) and discussion among friends (25%).[8] While in another study by Joseph *et al* at Mangalore, most popular source was newspapers followed by television.[10]

The present study showed that the students had some knowledge regarding palliative care previously. Since this topic is a small part of the nursing syllabus, all of the students had heard the term palliative care before and not its entire scope. An Indian study among general public demonstrated a contrast finding with low awareness (13.4%) of palliative care[10], Whereas, another study done in Vienna correlates the findings by favoring high awareness [11].

According to our study, 48.48% of students had average knowledge prior to the workshop while 6.06% had good knowledge, whereas, 45.45% had poor knowledge. After the intervention, none of the students were with poor or average knowledge, 63.63% students had excellent knowledge whereas 36.36% had comparatively good knowledge. The data in a study done by Karkada *et al* showed that 79.5% of students had poor knowledge on palliative care.[7] Another study by Daud *et al* showed that 25% had no knowledge, 23% had quite a bit of knowledge, 47% had some knowledge whereas 5% had very high knowledge.[8] In contrast, a comparable study done among Indian undergraduates health care students reported that the basic knowledge of palliative care among the students was inadequate.[3] In contrast, in a study done

at Mangalore, only 10.3% of the population had some knowledge on palliative care.[10]

According to the data in present study, 84.84% of the students were willing to acquire more information on palliative care prior to the workshop, this went upto 100% after workshop. Prior, 75.75% believed that palliative care will help to comfort the patient whereas this increased to 87.87% in post-test. 54.54% were comfortable in approaching end of life patient for palliative care before and it increased to 81.81% after the workshop.

This correlates with a study by Karkada *et al* where 92.8% had favorable attitude towards palliative care[7]. Another study done in Bulgaria showed that 67% participants expressed willingness to be involved.[12] Also a study in Vienna favors that there was willingness to learn more on palliative care.[11] whereas, in a study by Daud *et al* showed that when asked about whether they want to obtain information on end of life care, 57% preferred that information should be available, 23% wanted such information only if they themselves are diagnosed with life threatening illness and 10% wanted information only if a life threatening illness became terminal and another 43% did not want such information.[8]

World Health Organization has called for training institutions to make palliative care compulsory in courses leading to a basic professional qualifications.[6] A Canadian survey identified a number of barriers to palliative medicine education including lack of resources for curriculum developments and teaching for undergraduate students.[13]

Patient centered communication, ethical issues, decision making at the end of life, whole person care and interdisciplinary work are important and can have a lasting impact on future health practice.[14] Understanding the existing level of palliative care knowledge and attitude towards end of life care would be an important benchmark for analysis of future educational efforts.[15] This needs to be organized at the site of care along with integration with students clinical practice under supervision with the support from senior staff and physicians.

Thus findings of this study reflect the current knowledge and attitude of palliative care in nursing students. This study also identifies that supportive learning environment can contribute to a positive experience to the students. The main limitation of the study was the relatively small size of students. Based on these findings further research can be undertaken with a larger sample to assess the knowledge and attitude of the nursing students about palliative care.

Moreover, access to palliative care services could be greatly increased if nursing staff are trained in palliative care. We suggest that the content of palliative care should

be included in the health care provider's curriculum at an appropriate level that could be beneficial in terms of sensitizing the nursing students towards palliative care and helping the society at large.

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