Nurses Urged to Address Improved End-of-Life Care in Textbooks

We are writing to challenge nurses in the field of oncology to address the urgent need for improved end-of-life care. The care that nurses provide to patients at the end of life has received much recent attention. Numerous organizations have developed professional standards on end-of-life care for their members (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 1997; Field & Cassel, 1997). Although deficiencies in care at the end of life have many causes, insufficient training of nurses in this area is a major reason (Ferrell, Virani, Grant, Coyne, & Uman, 2000). Our research has identified major deficiencies in the end-of-life content of more than 50 nursing textbooks used in undergraduate nursing curriculum. The 50 textbooks spanned a wide range of nursing specialty areas, such as AIDS, health assessment, communication, community health, critical care, emergency, ethics/legal issues, fundamental and medical-surgical nursing, oncology, patient education, pediatrics, pharmacology, and psychiatric nursing.

Overall, only 2% of the content in nursing texts was related to any end-of-life-related topic, with similar results reported from review of texts for medicine and pharmacy (Ferrell, Virani, & Grant, 1999; Rabow, Hardie, Fair, & McPhee, 2000). Of the 50 reviewed textbooks, 2 (4%) were related to oncology care. A total of 3,264 pages reviewed from these two oncology nursing textbooks included 107.5 pages related to end-of-life care (3.3%). In the face of documented textbook deficiencies, we have undertaken an effort to encourage publishers, editors, and authors to improve their textbooks’ end-of-life content, including chapters, cross-referencing, and indexing. As a follow-up to this effort, we have reviewed textbook revisions and new additions to assess changes made during the time of the first review (1998) to the present.

We are pleased to report a very positive response. To date, the editors, authors, and publishers of the 50 nursing textbooks reviewed have responded that they have plans to expand or have already completed expansion of end-of-life content in their textbooks or future editions of their textbooks. The overall response of end-of-life content added to these books is approximately 40% of texts, with an additional 30% planning to expand content in their next editions. Recently, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) honored the textbook publishers, editors, and authors who have been working to make these important changes. On February 21, at an awards ceremony at the Last Acts National Leadership Conference, the researchers presented awards to 13 medical, nursing, and pharmaceutical editors, authors, and publishers. Eight of the 13 that were recognized were nursing texts.

Unfortunately, much work still needs to be done. Many best-selling textbooks have not yet responded to the suggestions of nursing specialty groups, the needs of readers, or the demands of patients and families to improve the education of nurses about care of patients at the end of life. We will continue monitoring textbooks over the next few years, and RWJF will continue to recognize those publishers, editors, and authors who improve the end-of-life content in their books.

In reviewing the textbooks, the oncology textbooks demonstrated strong emphases on hospice and palliative care. Other strong areas included pain and symptom management and communication with patients and family members at the end of life. Other topics that would enhance oncology textbooks could include care of dying patients outside of the hospice setting and additional content regarding ethical issues associated with end-of-life care. The current knowledge base for providing excellent palliative care must be quickly disseminated into the best-selling nursing textbooks. We encourage not only the Oncology Nursing Forum to promote end-of-life content but also editors, authors, and publishers of textbooks to promote end-of-life content within the specialty of oncology nursing.

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ONF – VOL 28, NO 9, 2001
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