

# Assessing Nurses' Attitudes Toward Death and Caring for Dying Patients in a Comprehensive Cancer Center

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**Purpose/Objectives:** To assess how nurses employed in a comprehensive cancer center feel about death and caring for dying patients and examine any relationships between their attitudes and demographic factors.

**Design:** Descriptive quantitative.

**Setting:** A 432-bed comprehensive cancer center in New York, NY.

**Sample:** A convenience sample of 355 inpatient and outpatient oncology nurses.

**Methods:** Voluntary and anonymous completion of the Frommelt Attitude Toward Care of the Dying (FATCOD), the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R), and a demographic questionnaire.

**Main Research Variables:** Years of total nursing experience, years employed at the cancer center, previous experience with caring for dying patients, age, gender, and attitudes toward death and caring for dying patients.

**Findings:** Statistically significant relationships were noted among age, nursing experience, previous experience with caring for terminally ill patients, and scores on the FATCOD and DAP-R. Nursing experience and age were the variables most likely to predict nurses' attitudes toward death and caring for dying patients.

**Conclusions:** RNs with more work experience tended to have more positive attitudes toward death and caring for dying patients.

**Implications for Nursing:** Based on the data collected in the study, less experienced oncology nurses will most likely benefit from increased education, training, and exposure to providing and coping effectively with end-of-life care.

Oncology nurses often care for patients in all stages of disease, from diagnosis to death or survivorship. A nurse's caseload in a shift can consist of patients in varying phases of illness, presenting a challenge to nurses who must constantly adjust to the different needs of each patient and their families. The attitudes of nurses toward death and dying patients may influence the care RNs are able to provide (Rooda, Clements, & Jordan, 1999). As the literature suggests, implementing an educational program tailored to oncology nurses' needs may be useful in helping to foster more positive attitudes toward death and dying patients, therefore providing quality end-of-life (EOL) care. A baseline assessment of nurses' attitudes toward death and caring for dying patients was conducted prior to designing, testing, and implementing such a program.

## Key Points . . .

- Oncology nurses may not always be comfortable caring for dying patients.
- Oncology nurses were found to have a generally positive attitude toward caring for dying patients, although nurses with more years of work experience had the most positive attitudes.
- Implementing educational programs at the time of staff orientation may offer less experienced nurses the knowledge they need to begin to provide care to dying patients and enable them to provide optimal care at the end of life.

## Literature Review

Several studies explore the attitudes of nurses caring for dying patients; however, the studies primarily have examined the points of view of homecare, hospice, and medical-surgical nurses. A gap in the literature exists as to how nurses caring for patients with cancer in a comprehensive cancer center view death and care of the dying. The literature also was reviewed for the effectiveness of nursing education interventions on nurses' attitudes toward caring for dying patients.

Rooda et al. (1999) used a convenience sample of 403 nurses from a private hospital and the Visiting Nurse Association Hospice Division and found that nurses with a greater fear of death exhibited fewer positive attitudes toward caring

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