



## **HPNA Position Statement** **Value of the Professional Nurse in Palliative Care**

### **Background**

As members of the largest healthcare profession, nurses have long advocated for attention to quality of life throughout the lifespan including end of life. It is nurses who provide consistent presence to patients and families who are facing terminal illness.<sup>1</sup> Nursing pioneers Florence Wald, Cicely Saunders (also a physician) and Jeanne Quint Benoliel can be credited with making significant and substantial contributions to what is now current palliative care practice. The work of these nurse leaders forged the way toward current standards of practice for comprehensive and compassionate care through the end of life.

Advanced terminal or chronic illness usually presents with not one, but multiple and often complex symptoms that affect the body, mind, and spirit of the patient. These symptoms require the professional nurse to employ highly trained skills and provide holistic care that is consistent with the goals of the patient and family. Individualized professional nursing care has never been more critical than in this context to maximize autonomy, dignity, healing, and comfort. Nurses help patients achieve quality of life in the context of life-threatening illness through professional nursing care that combines “science, presence, openness, compassion, mindful attention to detail, and teamwork.”<sup>2, p.5</sup> Competent, patient centered nursing practice for palliative care includes expert assessment skills, critical thinking, comprehensive pain and symptom management of the whole patient, effective communication skills, and a professional knowledge base to support ethical decision making.<sup>3,4</sup> These are the skills that patients and families value highly as death approaches.<sup>5,6</sup>

When faced with a serious illness, people turn to the professional nurse for education, support, and guidance. Nurses are intimately involved in all aspects of palliative care. Professional nurses face palliative care situations regardless of work setting, whether they work in hospitals, homes, long-term care facilities, clinics, universities and schools, industry, or prisons. They are the primary team members who coordinate, assess, direct, and evaluate patient care needs that arise during the illness experience. With their knowledge about the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual dimensions of advanced chronic and terminal

illnesses, nurses are central in assuring the comfort, autonomy, healing, and achievement of health goals of patients and their families.

The professional nurse is also key in moving the entire healthcare team towards a recognition of care in life-limiting situations and the comfort care and psychological support that are required.<sup>7</sup> Professional palliative care nursing is grounded in the positive traditions of past practices while shaping care for the future that will meet the evolving needs of the chronically ill and dying patients. The professional nurse establishes and supports the methods and means to assure these outcomes are met.

### **Position Statement**

This is the position of the HPNA Board of Directors:

- Competent professional nursing care is critical to achieving the patients', families', and communities' goals of care through the end of life.
- Support of hospice and palliative care research and education is necessary to ensure that care is evidence-based, effective, and appropriate.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Palliative Care:* The goal of palliative care is to prevent and relieve suffering and to support the best possible quality of life for patients and their families, regardless of the stage of the disease or the need for other therapies. Palliative care is both a philosophy of care and an organized, highly structured system for delivering care. Palliative care expands traditional disease-model medical treatments to include the goals of enhancing quality of life for patient and family, optimizing function, helping with decision-making and providing opportunities for personal growth.<sup>8, p.3</sup>

*Professional nurse:* A registered nurse who: protects, promotes, and optimizes the health and abilities of his or her patients; prevents illness and injury, alleviates suffering, and diagnoses and treats the human response to suffering; advocates for individuals, families, communities, and populations.<sup>9, p.6</sup>

*Critical thinking:* A process of utilizing cognitive skills to analyze, apply standards, discriminate, seek information/data, reason logically, predict and transform knowledge. Critical thinkers exhibit habits of the mind: confidence, contextual perspective, creativity, flexibility, inquisitiveness, intellectual integrity, intuition, open-mindedness, perseverance, and reflection.<sup>10</sup>

*Evidence-based practice:* A practice that is based on research, clinical expertise, and patient preferences that guides decisions about the healthcare of individual patients. Evidence-based nursing practice stresses the use of research findings,

quality improvement data (as appropriate), other operational, and evaluation data, the consensus of recognized experts, and affirmed experience to substantiate practice.<sup>11</sup>

## References

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