



HPNA Position Statement **The Value of the Nursing Assistant in Palliative Care**

Background:

Nursing assistants are an integral part of the healthcare team. In hospice and palliative care settings, other interdisciplinary team members rely on nursing assistants (may be referred to as “hospice aides”), for their observations and reports in developing and implementing the plan of care for patients with progressive, life-limiting illnesses and their families.

Because of these unique palliative care team roles and responsibilities, the National Board for Certification of Hospice and Palliative Nurses (NBCHPN[®]), provides hospice and palliative care nursing assistants the opportunity to achieve certification. The Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association (HPNA) also extends its membership to include nursing assistants. As a professional nursing organization, HPNA is unique in its inclusion of nursing assistants in its membership as well as its recognition of the specialized skills and the clinical contributions of nursing assistants providing palliative care.

Nursing assistants play a central role in providing care to patients with progressive, life-limiting illnesses and their families. Many nursing assistants are deeply committed to their work in hospice and palliative care and strive to maintain a very high level of care. However, nursing assistants frequently receive low wages, burdensome workloads, and lack of recognition and respect.¹⁻² These factors contribute to job dissatisfaction and turnover, factors that negatively influence the quality of end-of-life care as well as patient and family satisfaction.³

The cornerstone of practice for the nursing assistant is providing personal care and assisting with activities of daily living (ADLs). Nursing assistants practice within a variety of hospice and palliative care settings including long-term care, acute care, and within patient’s homes. In some of these settings, nursing assistants provide up to 90 percent of hands-on patient care.³

Because of their intense, consistent interactions with patients and families, nursing assistants may be the first providers to observe the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual symptoms that are common as patients experience the progression of their disease. Nursing assistants also witness and experience

the profound, multiple losses, and grief that accompany the dying process and the loss of loved ones.

Although nursing assistants do not make decisions about medical therapies or administer therapies such as medications, they are responsible for observing, screening and reporting symptoms for which these therapies are given and the outcomes occurring as a result of the therapies. Because the attitudes of nursing assistants towards certain therapies, such as opioids and artificial nutrition, are communicated either directly or indirectly to patients and families, nursing assistants must be educated about reasons for implementing or withdrawing these therapies. In addition, they must be encouraged to reflect on and understand the impact that their beliefs and values may have to influence patients and families. Nursing assistants also must be kept informed about the medical decision-making processes for patients in their care so they can provide support and reinforcement of the care plan.

Nursing assistants are integral members of the hospice and palliative care team and as such can contribute substantially to treatment planning. Yet their expertise in observing and reporting relevant patient and family information is not consistently recognized across settings. In order to be actively involved in planning and providing quality end-of-life care, nursing assistants need to possess a thorough knowledge of hospice and palliative care concepts and practices. In addition, their experience and insights must be recognized and validated by the interdisciplinary team.⁴ (Nursing assistants who are educated and involved in the team care planning process experience greater job satisfaction, which may in turn decrease job turnover that threatens the quality and consistency of end-of-life care.)⁵

Position Statement

This is the position of the HPNA Board of Directors:

- Nurses and healthcare organizations recognize that care provided by nursing assistants is critical to achieving established goals of care for patients with progressive, life-limiting illness and their families.
- Registered nurses recognize that nursing assistants are a vital and important member of the palliative care team. Nursing assistants deliver care which assists the professional nurse in accomplishing the patient and family's goals and plan of care.
- Healthcare institutions and organizations ensure that nursing assistants in all settings receive adequate educational preparation to care for patients with progressive, life-limiting illnesses and their families.
- Nurses and administrators in all palliative care settings must advocate for the inclusion of nursing assistants within the interdisciplinary team. Traditional hospice settings have included nursing assistants on the Interdisciplinary team; nursing assistants must now also be included on all teams in which the focus of care is palliative.

Definition of Terms

Hospice Aides: The term now used to define “nursing assistants” in the *Federal Register*, Vol. 73, #109, June 5, 2008 Rules and Regulations *Medicare and Medicaid Program: Hospice Conditions of Participation*.

Nursing Assistant: Nursing assistants assist individuals with healthcare needs with activities of daily living (ADLs) and provide bedside care—including basic nursing procedures—all under the supervision of a registered nurse (RN) or licensed practical/vocational nurse (LP/VN) according to regulatory boards as applicable.⁶

Palliative Care: The prevention and relief of suffering in patients and families, regardless of the stage of disease or need for other therapies. The goal of palliative care is to enhance quality of life for the patient and family, optimize function, assist with decision-making, and provide opportunities for personal growth⁷

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.⁸

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