Spirituality and Palliative Care

How does spiritual care improve the well-being of palliative care patients?
A literature review Faith Porter

The aim of this literature review is to examine how spiritual care within nursing practice improves the well-being of palliative care patients. Spiritual care refers to a wide range of nursing care aimed at nurturing and sustaining spiritual growth and well-being in patients from multi-faith and secular worldviews. This review will describe the importance of spiritual care to palliative care patients by examining the impact it can have on their well-being.

1. The difficulty with defining spirituality
Current nursing literature debates the topic of a universal definition of spirituality. However, providing spiritual care relies upon a working definition of spirituality. Definitions of spirituality must be flexible and adaptable to individual interpretations of spirituality across varying life spans, healthcare settings, environments and cultures. Consequently, spirituality within nursing practice in general has broadened to encompass both the horizontal limb and the vertical limb (Olson 1997).

2. The relevance of the debate to nursing practice
The consequence of the debate is the discourse surrounding spirituality and spiritual care within nursing practice. To come to a consensus regarding what spirituality is and how nurses can provide appropriate spiritual care. Effective spiritual care nurtures and sustains the well-being of the whole person. Nurses are in a strategic position to nurture the qualities of forgiveness, hope, trust and opening the door to meaning and purpose in life for the spiritual dimension of their patients. Care of the spirit allows the palliative care patient to transcend the limitations of their current physical conditions producing positive health outcomes in body, mind and spirit.

3. The importance of spirituality and spiritual care within the domain of palliative care
Diagnosis of a terminal illness can begin the search for meaning, forgiveness and hope for patients as a way of living their life in step with their values (Stephenson and Druaer 2003). Thus, in order to assist patients with the spiritual needs of the dying patient it is essential for nurses to feel comfortable and empowered to recognize these subtle cues.

4. Enabling spiritual growth and well-being
4.1 Subjectivity
The difficulty in providing appropriate and effective spiritual care to palliative care patients is that individuals' spirituality is a highly subjective experience. Research supports the notion that nurses approach spiritual care from varying perspectives according to how they interpret and perceive spirituality and spiritual needs in their own lives (Harrington 2014; van Lelouwen et al 2008). However, to assist patients with the spiritual needs of the dying patient it is essential for nurses to feel comfortable and empowered to recognize these subtle cues.

4.2 Connectedness
The relationship between the nurse and the patient in the palliative care setting can be a powerful support for personal spiritual growth (Nok & Chu 2008) by opening opportunities to express and experience a sense of purpose in life (Burkhart 1994). However, the extent to which both nurse and patient are willing to connect is the spiritual dimension of the relationship. The degree of spiritual well-being for the patient (Nok & Chu 2004; Sellers 2002) has been found to be an important factor in determining the degree of spiritual well-being for the patient (Nok & Chu 2004; Sellers 2002). The extent to which both nurse and patient are willing to connect is the spiritual dimension of the relationship. The degree of spiritual well-being for the patient (Nok & Chu 2004; Sellers 2002) has been found to be an important factor in determining the degree of spiritual well-being for the patient (Nok & Chu 2004; Sellers 2002).

4.3 The role of the nurse
The importance of establishing and maintaining interpersonal connectedness, particularly between the nurse and the palliative care patient is reflected in descriptive studies of spiritual support strategies (Harrington 2004). Qualities such as faith, meaning, transformation and transcendence (Marston & Sidney 1998) are nurtured and sustained in palliative care patients with the support of nursing and added need to improve their emotional and spiritual well-being.

5. The impact of spiritual care on the well being of palliative care patients
5.1 Faith
Faith is a spiritual dimension or personal faith is a source of nourishment and openness that enables many palliative care patients to experience unity and communion with themselves, others and God. The literature supports the view that strong personal or religious faith is a rich source of social and emotional support for the palliative care patient (Sodhill et al 2002) by providing meaning and comfort during difficult times.

5.2 Finding meaning
The experience of a life-threatening illness can provide a re-evaluation of the individual's life and purpose, leading them to seek meaning and activities that are meaningful and satisfying (Albright-Petrie 1997; Buckman 1994). Dying patients discover meaning in their lives through their ability to connect to and understand the experiences of others (Coward 1996). It is the act of understanding the unfolding of life's events and accepting the shapings process of change and transformation.

Nurses can assist palliative care patients to find meaning through their spiritual journey along a fluid path of change and transformation.

5.3 A process of transformation
Transformation relates to the spiritual journey and is a continuous process of unfolding by means of which the dying patient discovers their unique way of utilizing suffering on their spiritual path (Albright-Petrie 1997). Thus, the struggle of dealing with a life-threatening illness is viewed as a spiritual process of transformation and a sense of becoming the person you want to be.

5.4 Transcendence
Transcendence is seen as the final goal of spiritual care, particularly for the dying patient as it allows them to move beyond the limitations of their current illness. The quality of transcendence has the potential to increase a person's sense of worth, purpose and connection with others (Coward 1996 cited in Chu 2000). It enables the suffering and pain experienced during the course of palliative care to be transformed into a meaningful event in that it allows the participants to deepen their spiritual journey and uncover meaning and purpose in life (Chen et al 2000).

Implications for nursing practice
Thus, spiritual care and a knowledge of the role it plays in the well-being of patients is an important aspect of nursing practice. A comprehensive understanding of the importance and impact of spiritual care on the well being of palliative care patients informs nursing practice. This understanding enriches the attitudes and perceptions of nurses by completing the holistic picture of the patient.

This review of the literature adds to the body of knowledge which continues to emerge regarding spiritual care of dying patients by highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of spirituality within nursing literature and the vital role it plays in improving patient well-being.

References

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