

A Review of Current Research and Future Directions in Palliative Care and Death Education in Nursing Education

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Abstract: *This study examines nursing students' palliative care competencies, attitudes toward death, and the current state of palliative care curriculum design. Educational interventions, such as participatory teaching and Noddings' care theory, significantly enhance students' skills and attitudes but require further exploration of their long-term effects and cultural relevance. Factors like empathy and social service experience influence students' willingness to engage in palliative care. Future research should focus on optimizing curricula, developing tailored evaluation tools, and investigating sustained impacts to improve nursing education and care for terminally ill patients.*

Keywords: Palliative care, Nursing education, Death attitudes, Educational interventions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the aging population in China, the prevalence of terminal illnesses such as chronic diseases and malignant tumors has been steadily increasing, leading to a growing demand for palliative care [1,2]. Palliative care aims to improve the quality of life for terminally ill patients by addressing their physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs [3]. However, the current nursing education system in China falls short in preparing students for palliative care, with inadequate curriculum design and a general lack of knowledge and skills among nursing students [4,5]. Studies have shown that nursing interns' attitudes and competencies in palliative care are crucial for improving the quality of care provided [1,6]. Therefore, enhancing nursing students' palliative care capabilities is an urgent issue in nursing education today.

Globally, palliative care education has made significant progress, with many countries incorporating palliative care into formal nursing curricula [7,8]. In contrast, China's efforts in this area remain in their early stages, with education models and content lacking systematic and practical approaches [9,10]. Furthermore, cultural factors and societal perceptions greatly influence the acceptance and implementation of palliative care education, particularly in minority regions where traditional beliefs often hinder acceptance of end-of-life care [10]. As such, an in-depth examination of the current state of palliative care education in China and the development of effective educational interventions are of both theoretical and practical importance.

1.2 Purpose of the Review

This review aims to systematically analyze recent domestic and international research on palliative care and death education, focusing on strategies to cultivate nursing students'

competencies in palliative care and attitudes toward death. Specifically, it seeks to:

Review the theoretical foundations and practical advancements in palliative care education;

Identify gaps in nursing students' abilities in end-of-life care and their attitudes toward death;

Evaluate the effectiveness of various educational interventions in enhancing palliative care competencies;

Explore their practical applications in teaching; and

Propose future research directions and recommendations to advance nursing education reform and development in China.

2. Definitions and Theoretical Foundations of Palliative Care and Death Education

2.1 Definition of Palliative Care

Palliative care is a comprehensive care model designed for patients with terminal illnesses. Its primary aim is to alleviate physical, psychological, and emotional suffering while enhancing the quality of life for patients. The core philosophy of palliative care is achieving a "good death," enabling patients to pass away with dignity and comfort [2]. The implementation of palliative care typically involves a multidisciplinary team of professionals, including physicians, nurses, social workers, and volunteers, to ensure holistic support for both patients and their families during the end-of-life stage [5].

2.2 Definition of Death Education

Death education refers to systematic teaching activities that help students understand the naturalness, significance, and impact of death on life. Its objectives include fostering an

accurate understanding of death, reducing death-related anxiety, and improving the ability to face death [7]. In nursing education, death education encompasses not only the biological and psychological aspects of death but also the development of palliative care skills to equip healthcare professionals with the competencies necessary for clinical practice [9].

2.3 Theoretical Foundations

2.3.1 Noddings' Care Theory

Noddings' care theory emphasizes the significance of "caring" in nursing, asserting that the essence of nursing lies in forming emotional connections with patients [6]. This theory provides critical theoretical support for palliative care and death education by highlighting the role of care-focused education in fostering nursing students' empathy and caring attitudes. Under this framework, students develop care skills through role modeling, dialogue, and practical experiences, enhancing their understanding and support for patients.

2.3.2 Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory suggests that individuals experience anxiety when confronted with death, which often manifests through defensive mechanisms, such as reinforcing worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships [11]. In the context of death education, understanding this theory helps nursing students recognize the inevitability of death, equipping them to better meet the needs of terminal patients while reducing their own death anxiety [12].

2.3.3 Meaning in Life Theory

The meaning in life theory emphasizes the importance of understanding life's purpose and mission as a way to maintain psychological well-being [9]. In nursing education, enhancing students' sense of life meaning is considered a vital approach to improving their attitudes toward death. A stronger sense of meaning in life helps students overcome anxiety and fear associated with death, fosters professional identity, and cultivates a positive approach to end-of-life care [12].

3. Current Status of Palliative Care and Death Education in Nursing Education

3.1 Status of Palliative Care Education

Due to the relatively late development of palliative care in China, its incorporation into nursing education remains insufficient. Studies have shown that only a small number of medical colleges offer dedicated palliative care courses, which primarily focus on theoretical knowledge with limited practical components [1,5]. Research conducted in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region indicates that most nursing institutions do not provide standalone palliative care courses; instead, related content is sporadically covered in other courses [10]. This fragmented approach results in insufficient knowledge and skills among nursing students, negatively impacting their performance in clinical practice [2,3].

Additionally, the shortage of qualified educators further

weakens palliative care education. Many teachers lack professional training and practical experience in this area, directly affecting the quality of instruction [4,5]. To address the growing demand for palliative care, nursing education must place greater emphasis on cultivating professionals equipped with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

3.2 Status of Death Education

In China, traditional cultural taboos surrounding death contribute to fear and avoidance among nurses and nursing students when faced with terminally ill patients. Consequently, the importance of death education in nursing programs is increasingly being recognized, particularly for helping students develop appropriate perspectives on death and improving their ability to confront it [7,9]. However, the current system of death education in China is still in its infancy, characterized by simplistic curricula and a lack of systematic approaches [7,12]. Studies reveal that nursing students generally possess low levels of knowledge, attitudes, and coping abilities regarding death. This deficiency becomes especially evident when students encounter terminally ill patients, often leading to discomfort and fear [11,14].

In contrast, death education in other countries is more advanced, incorporating a comprehensive curriculum that combines theory and practice. It includes topics such as end-of-life care, death psychology, and ethics [7,9]. In China, research on death education has primarily focused on vocational and intern nursing students, with relatively underdeveloped educational models [7,12]. Among undergraduate nursing students, scores on knowledge and attitudes toward end-of-life care are moderate, and their experience in practical end-of-life care is limited [14].

3.3 Limitations of Educational Models and Teaching Methods

Current teaching methods for palliative care and death education in nursing are insufficient. Traditional lecture-based methods, lacking interaction and engagement, fail to stimulate students' interest and active participation [1,4]. The absence of participatory and experiential teaching approaches limits students' learning outcomes. Studies suggest that participatory interactive teaching can effectively improve nursing students' attitudes toward palliative care and acceptance of death [1,6]. Thus, future nursing education should adopt more diverse teaching methods, incorporating simulation, group discussions, and experiential learning activities to enhance students' learning experiences and competencies [6,9].

4. Nursing Students' Attitudes Toward Palliative Care and Death Anxiety

4.1 Attitudes Toward Palliative Care

Nursing students, as the future workforce in healthcare, play a crucial role in the quality of palliative care. Studies indicate that nursing students generally exhibit positive attitudes toward palliative care, though significant variations exist [13,5]. When interacting with terminally ill patients, students often demonstrate high levels of empathy, especially in

communication and emotional support [12]. However, a lack of education and clinical experience leaves many students feeling uncertain and anxious [2,6].

Quantitative evaluations of nursing students' attitudes toward palliative care show moderately high scores, particularly in their willingness to care for and understand terminally ill patients [14]. Nevertheless, students exhibit deficiencies in practical skills, especially in areas such as pain management and psychological support [10]. These findings suggest that while nursing students' attitudes toward palliative care are generally positive, their practical abilities require further development.

4.2 Death Anxiety

Death anxiety is a common issue among nursing students when confronted with terminally ill patients. Studies show that nursing students experience high levels of death anxiety, particularly when they lack clinical experience and relevant education [11,12]. This anxiety not only affects their academic and internship performance but may also have long-term negative impacts on their professional careers [2,9].

Several factors contribute to death anxiety, including individual characteristics, educational background, and clinical experience. Research indicates that nursing students with higher levels of empathy and knowledge of end-of-life care tend to have lower death anxiety [8,13]. Furthermore, students who engage in volunteer work or have direct exposure to terminally ill patients often display greater acceptance of death and lower anxiety levels [5,15]. These findings highlight the critical role of educational interventions and practical experiences in reducing death anxiety among nursing students.

5. Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Palliative Care and Death Education in Nursing Students

The effectiveness of palliative care and death education in nursing education is influenced by various factors, which can be categorized into personal factors, educational factors, and sociocultural factors.

5.1 Personal Factors

Personal factors play a significant role in shaping nursing students' outcomes in palliative care and death education. Studies have shown that traits such as empathy, a sense of meaning in life, and attitudes toward death have a profound impact on students' performance in these areas [2,12].

Empathy is crucial for providing effective care to terminally ill patients. Students with high levels of empathy are better able to understand patients' emotional needs, thereby fostering more positive attitudes toward palliative care [13,14]. Similarly, enhancing students' sense of meaning in life helps them overcome anxiety and fear associated with death, promoting professional identity and a positive approach to care [9,12]. A strong sense of meaning in life is positively correlated with students' attitudes toward caregiving, with dimensions such as life purpose and

acceptance of death serving as significant predictors of positive attitudes.

5.2 Educational Factors

Educational factors, including curriculum design, teaching methods, and faculty expertise, are critical to the success of palliative care and death education [1,4,10].

The systematic and comprehensive nature of curriculum design directly impacts students' understanding and mastery of palliative care and death education. Studies reveal that many nursing institutions lack standalone palliative care courses, with related content scattered across other subjects, leading to gaps in essential knowledge and skills [1,10]. Diverse teaching methods are equally important. Participatory interactive teaching, simulation-based learning, and group discussions effectively enhance students' engagement and improve their attitudes toward end-of-life care [1,6]. Additionally, faculty expertise and experience play a crucial role in ensuring the quality of instruction. A lack of professional training and practical experience among educators can hinder the effectiveness of teaching [4,5].

5.3 Sociocultural Factors

Sociocultural factors also have a profound impact on the effectiveness of palliative care and death education. Traditional cultural beliefs, societal attitudes toward death, and the acceptance of palliative care can influence students' learning experiences and psychological adaptation [7,10].

In China, death is often considered taboo, which can lead to discomfort and resistance among students when engaging with death-related education. This cultural perspective may reduce students' acceptance of death education. Furthermore, societal awareness and acceptance of palliative care also affect students' professional identity and career aspirations. Research shows that experiences such as volunteering and working with cancer or terminally ill patients significantly enhance students' willingness to engage in palliative care [2,3].

6. The Impact of Educational Interventions on Palliative Care and Death Education

Educational interventions play a vital role in improving nursing students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to palliative care and death education. By incorporating systematic curriculum design and practical activities, these interventions not only enhance students' professional competencies but also foster positive attitudes toward death, thereby improving the quality of end-of-life care.

6.1 Effectiveness of Educational Interventions

Educational interventions based on participatory interactive teaching and Noddings' care theory have been shown to significantly improve students' attitudes and abilities in palliative care. Participatory teaching methods, including simulation and group discussions, have demonstrated a positive impact on students' attitudes toward palliative care, particularly in communication and emotional support with

terminally ill patients. These methods not only increase students' engagement but also enhance their empathy, enabling them to provide more compassionate care [1,6].

Additionally, curriculum designs grounded in Noddings' care theory effectively enhance vocational nursing students' attitudes and caregiving abilities. After completing such courses, students show significant improvements in their caregiving skills, highlighting the positive impact of educational interventions on fostering humanistic care [6].

6.2 The Impact of Death Education

As an essential component of nursing education, death education profoundly influences students' psychological adaptation and professional identity. It helps students develop appropriate perspectives on death and equips them with the skills to address end-of-life challenges. Systematic death education reduces death anxiety and enhances students' understanding of the naturalness of death [7,11].

Combining aging-related experiential learning with death-focused interventions has been shown to successfully reduce students' death anxiety while significantly improving their attitudes toward palliative care. This indicates that death education not only strengthens professional competencies but also helps students emotionally cope with the demands of end-of-life care [11].

6.3 Limitations of Educational Interventions and Future Directions

Despite the effectiveness of educational interventions, certain limitations remain. Many studies have small sample sizes and are often limited to a single institution or region, reducing the generalizability of findings [4,5]. Additionally, the long-term effects of educational interventions are underexplored, with limited research on the sustainability of students' improvements in skills and attitudes [9,12].

Future research should expand sample sizes to include nursing students from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds to verify the applicability of educational interventions. Moreover, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods can provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of interventions on students' psychological adaptation and professional identity [2,10].

7. Future Research Directions and Challenges

As the importance of palliative care and death education in nursing education continues to grow, future research should address several critical areas to tackle the challenges present in the current educational system. Key areas for exploration include curriculum design, educational interventions, cultural adaptability, the development of assessment tools, and long-term impact studies.

7.1 Optimization of Curriculum Design

The current curriculum for palliative care and death education in many nursing schools lacks both systematic structure and practical components [4,10]. Future research should focus on

developing more comprehensive curricula that integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills, aiming to enhance students' clinical competencies and humanistic care abilities. In minority regions, curriculum design must account for local cultural practices and traditions to improve adaptability and effectiveness [10]. Studies should explore how to incorporate regional cultural elements into palliative care courses to foster nursing students' understanding of and empathy toward terminally ill patients.

7.2 Diversification of Educational Interventions

Existing research shows that participatory teaching methods, such as interactive activities, simulation-based learning, and volunteer service, significantly improve nursing students' attitudes and competencies in palliative care [1,2,13]. Future studies should investigate the effectiveness of various educational interventions, particularly the integration of multiple teaching methods to achieve optimal learning outcomes. Additionally, more targeted death education programs for vocational nursing students should be developed to address their psychological and emotional needs [9].

7.3 Research on Cultural Adaptability

Cultural background has a significant influence on nursing students' attitudes toward death and their palliative care competencies [7,10]. Future research should focus on understanding the learning needs and acceptance levels of students from different cultural backgrounds and exploring ways to incorporate culturally adaptive elements into the curriculum. For example, studies targeting nursing students in rural areas could examine how community engagement and volunteer activities enhance their understanding and acceptance of palliative care [15].

7.4 Development and Validation of Assessment Tools

Currently, there is a lack of effective tools to assess nursing students' palliative care competencies and the outcomes of death education. Future research should focus on developing and validating assessment tools tailored to the context of Chinese nursing education. These tools should comprehensively evaluate competencies in caregiving skills, cultural and ethical values, and interdisciplinary teamwork [8].

7.5 Long-Term Impact Studies

Although existing studies have demonstrated the positive effects of educational interventions on nursing students' attitudes toward end-of-life care and their palliative care skills, research on the long-term impact of these interventions remains insufficient [1,4]. Future studies should focus on the sustainability of educational outcomes, exploring how nursing students apply their knowledge and skills in real-world practice and how these competencies affect their professional development and psychological adaptation over time.

8. Conclusion

Palliative care and death education hold a crucial place in nursing education, significantly enhancing students' palliative

care competencies and attitudes toward death. Educational interventions, such as participatory teaching methods and Noddings' care theory, have been shown to effectively improve students' attitudes and caregiving abilities. However, more attention is needed to evaluate the long-term effects of these interventions and their applicability across diverse cultural contexts.

Future research should aim to expand sample sizes to include nursing students from different regions and cultural backgrounds to validate the generalizability of educational interventions. Combining quantitative and qualitative research methods will provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of these interventions on students' psychological adaptation and professional identity. Additionally, the development of assessment tools tailored to Chinese nursing education will enable more precise evaluation of students' competencies and attitudes in palliative care and death education.

In summary, advancing research and practice in palliative care and death education will provide a strong foundation for improving the quality of nursing education in China, fostering highly skilled nursing professionals, and ultimately enhancing the quality of care and life experiences for terminally ill patients.

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