A Work Sampling Assessment of the Nursing Delivery of Palliative Care in Ambulatory Cancer Centers

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Background: Most cancer care occurs within infusion rooms at ambulatory cancer centers, which are staffed by RNs administering chemotherapies and other cancer care medications. Many patients receiving these therapies have basic palliative care needs that could be addressed by the RNs. However, the extent to which these RNs spend their time on basic, or “primary,” palliative care is unknown.

Objectives: The aim of this project was to conduct a work sampling assessment of infusion room RNs’ work activities and provision of primary palliative care.

Methods: A single observer conducted direct observation work sampling at three academic cancer center infusion rooms. Nursing tasks were recorded via freehand text and later assigned an appropriate task code.

Findings: Observed infusion room RNs spent about 1% of their time on direct care palliative care tasks, primarily symptom assessment. The remainder of their time was divided among direct (28%) and indirect (56%) nonpalliative care activities, unit-related activities (7%), and personal time (9%). Infusion room RNs spent less than a third of their time on administering direct patient care and very minimal time on performing palliative care activities.

The majority of cancer care now occurs within ambulatory care settings (Muir et al., 2010) where patients receive cancer-directed treatments, such as chemotherapy. Many of these patients have significant palliative care needs, including physical and psychological symptoms (e.g., pain, bowel irregularity, debilitating fatigue, anxiety, depression). Early palliative care provided by specialists has been shown in randomized, controlled trials to affect patient and caregiver outcomes, such as improved quality of life and decreased symptom distress (Gaertner, Weingartner, Wolf, & Volzt, 2013; Hui et al., 2015). The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article. The authors did not receive honoraria for this work. The content of this article has been reviewed by independent peer reviewers to ensure that it is balanced, objective, and free from commercial bias. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the authors, planners, independent peer reviewers, or editorial staff. Davison can be reached at jendavison.pgh@gmail.com, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org. (Submitted July 2015. Revision submitted September 2015. Accepted for publication September 30, 2015.)

Key words: work sampling; nursing; palliative care; infusion room RNs; nursing time

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