What are the Impacts of Communication Skills Training in a Foundation Degree for Support Workers?

Christina Faul1, Kay Phelps2, Stephen Handsley3, Jane wale4, Anita Noguer5

1 LOROS Hospice Leicester 2 University of Nottingham 3 ICCR - Independent Consultants in Community Research

Background

Unregistered health and social care such as health care assistants and domiciliary care workers arguably provide the bulk of end of life care. They spend more time with people than trained staff, undertake more personal care and are often seen as the closest ally and friend by the people they care for. Their patients/clients may entrust them with unique confidences and share fears, hopes and regrets.

Results of the study indicated a greater competence in key end of life aspects of communication. Students felt more able to deal with challenging situations and actually it turned into kind of a humorous conversation and quite light hearted, but we did talk about death didn’t we? Do you remember all that?

Interviews

These identified much greater confidence in working with communication scenarios that students previously would have found challenging and would have avoided or disengaged with. Use of silence was a key new strategy.

Change in students’ self evaluation of effectiveness in communicating with patients with advanced & terminal illnesses & their families

Eleven support workers taking a two year foundation degree in palliative and supportive care (FD) participated in an evaluation study. Communication skills training including role play was embedded in two modules of the FD which is accredited by the University of Northampton and delivered jointly with LOROS (deCaestecker 2008).

Methods

Mixed quantitative and qualitative methods were used at time points over two years. In order to make the study least burdensome and maximize participation students were permitted to participate as they felt able.

Change in Student Confidence in Responding to Patients who they can see no meaning in life

Change in students’ self evaluation of effectiveness in communicating with patients with advanced & terminal illness and their families

Results:

- Confidence increased in responding to a patient who says “I can see no meaning in life” (MI) for those who felt unconfident in this at the start of the degree (Graph 1).
- At the start of the FD students all disagreed with the FATCODb statement “When a patient asks, “Am I dying?” I think it is best to change the subject to something cheerful.” (Q1). This level of disagreement was maintained or deepened at the end of the two years.
- The median score for self-evaluated effectiveness in communicating with patients with advanced and terminal illness and their families increased from 5 to 8.5 for students as a group on an 11 point scale. The scores for 4 students who completed the PERT at the beginning and end of the FD are shown in Graph 2.

Graph 1: Graph showing change in student confidence in responding to patients who they can see no meaning in life

Graph 2: Graph showing change in student confidence in communicating with patients with advanced & terminal illnesses & their families

CONCLUSION:

Students felt more able to deal with challenging situations and self-reflective as well as externally reported practice indicated a greater competence in key end of life communication tasks. Students and others identified the pivotal importance of confidence and competence in communication underpinning the outcomes for all aspects of end of life care.

References:


Ersek et al., 2005. Enhancing end-of-life care in nursing homes: palliative care educational resources program. J Pall Med 8; 556-566
