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Educating oncology nurse practitioners to provide primary palliative care

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Approximately 1.66 million Americans are diagnosed with cancer each year and another 589,430 die from the disease. As treatment options expand, patients are living longer with worsening symptoms and an increased illness burden, and are ideal candidates for palliative care. Palliative care is delivered by clinicians with specialty training and a focus on improving the quality of life for patients with serious illnesses. A number of major organizations recommend the integration of palliative care into comprehensive cancer care including the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN). With an advanced education and scope of practice, a holistic orientation, and based on evidence of providing safe and effective care, nurse practitioners (NPs) are well positioned to improve access to palliative care; yet, many lack basic content knowledge of palliative care and do not have competencies in the provision of its care. This study used valid and reliable instruments and a one-group pre and post-test design to measure differences in NPs' knowledge of and self-rated competence in the provision of basic palliative care before and after a formal educational program. The content, drawn from the End of Life Nursing Education Consortium's (ELNEC) APRN curriculum, was delivered in one 8-hour session, by an experienced NP currently enrolled in the palliative care track of a DNP program. The study was conducted with nurse practitioners practicing in the regional network sites of an NCI-designated comprehensive cancer center.

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