Will a palliative care course enhance competencies of medical students delivering bad news to patients?

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INTRODUCTION

Home care/end-of-life training for medical students begins with a medical home visit to an elder and a small group case presentation after. Later that day, this group is called to assist with patients who had been rushed to the emergency department. The elder (now a simulation mannequin) requires resuscitation. Advance Directive (AD) is available, which might inform their decision about whether to discontinue their efforts; however, despite everything, the elder dies. Following pronunciation of death, each student completes a death certificate and informs family members (actors) of the death; they are met with different reactions.

Prior to 2010 students had not had a Palliative Care course in their previous year. But after medical students participated in a one-week Palliative Care course, our thesis is that Palliative Care education will improve crucial end-of-life care competencies, such as Knowledge/understanding of Advance Directives and enhanced communication skills/ability to deliver bad news. To test this, videos of students informing family members were reviewed by 3 raters including one clinician and data was analyzed by Chi-Square and Independent Samples t-test. Student cohorts from 2008-10 (Pre) and 2010-11 (Post) were compared for statistically significant differences.

We assigned the competency 'Knowledge' to be whether the student mentioned Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) or AD during the session and whether students used DNR/AD as an excuse to stop. Fewer students in the Post group mentioned the DNR/AD than the Pre group, and the Pre group used DNR/AD as a reason to stop significantly more than the Post group. In the competency 'Communication,' students in the Post group were significantly more likely to check what the relative knew before breaking bad news, and they answered the relative's questions significantly better than in the Pre group.

DISCOVERIES (WORDS USED)

KNOWLEDGE COMPETENCY
During BBN, did the student doctor mention AD or DNR?
- Decreased after palliative care
- Did the student doctor use AD/DNR as an excuse to stop?
  - Decreased after palliative care

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY
Before BBN, did the student doctor check what they knew?
- Increased after palliative care
- Did the student doctor adequately answer questions?
  - Decreased after palliative care
- Time for the student doctor to BBN?
  - No difference

PROFESSIONALISM COMPETENCY
Did the student doctor appropriately arrange the environment?
- More likely to do so after palliative care
- Did the student doctor use technical language?
- Use of technical language decreased after palliative care
- Did the student doctor use the word “sorry”?
- Fewer uses of “sorry” after palliative care
- Did the student doctor comfort the patient?
  - Students less likely after palliative care
- Did the student doctor take charge of the encounter?
  - No difference

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of the session, students will be able to:
- Implement correct use of AD and DNR orders
- Convey accurate information
- Demonstrate compassionate communication skills
- Complete a death certificate

In addition, they will:
- Develop an arsenal of appropriate words for conveying bad news.
- Gain insight into personal reactions to loss
- Reinforce previously learned medical skills

Osteopathic Seven Core Competencies
I. Osteopathic Principles and Practices
II. Medical Knowledge
III. Patient Care
IV. Interpersonal and Communication Skills
V. Professionalism
VI. Practice-Based Learning and Improvement
VII. Systems-Based Practice

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RESOURCES

DEFINITIONS
- Advance Directive (AD) is written by an individual, outlines what they want if they are in a terminal condition and cannot speak for themselves.
- Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) is written by a physician, in consultation with a patient in a hospital or nursing home. Kept in a chart. Not transferable over time or place.
- BBN: Breaking Bad News
- EOL: End of Life
- HHC: Home Health Care

SUGGESTED READING