NURSES’ CARE OF THE SPIRIT FOR CHILDREN WITH CANCER AT THE END OF LIFE:
EFFECTS OF AN ONLINE EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Background/Significance: It is known that spirituality assists children and their families to cope with illnesses like cancer by giving meaning to their struggles. Spiritual care for the child with cancer at the end of life involves assessing the child’s spiritual needs, guiding the child to strengthen relationships and find meaning in life and death, assisting the child to express feelings and be remembered, and identifying sources of hope. While research about the effects of spiritual care on patient outcomes in children is limited, spiritual care in the adult patient population is associated with important patient outcomes including improved quality of life, enhanced patient satisfaction with care, increased use of hospice, decreased use of aggressive medical interventions at the end of life, and diminished medical costs. While nurses provide care to an individual’s mind, body, and spirit, spiritual care to address patients’ and families’ spiritual needs has infrequently been addressed in nursing education. Resultant gaps in nurses’ knowledge and perceived spiritual care competence prevent many dying children and their families from receiving adequate spiritual care to address their spiritual needs as the end of life approaches.

Purpose of the Study: This study investigated the effect of an online educational program on pediatric nurses’ attitudes towards and knowledge of spirituality/spiritual care and nurses’ perceived level of spiritual care competence.

Conceptual Framework: The Actioning Spirituality and Spiritual Care Education and Training in Nursing (ASSET) Model has been shown to guide changes in nurses’ knowledge, attitudes, and competence to provide spiritual care to patients, thereby offering a strategy to guide development of spiritual care educational initiatives.

Sample Description: An international convenience sample of 200 nurses who care for children with cancer was recruited by email and in person from membership in the Association of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology Nurses.

Setting: The spiritual care educational program was delivered online through a password-protected course management system.

Method/Design/Procedure: This study employed a prospective, longitudinal design. The intervention’s effects on nurses’ attitudes towards and knowledge of spirituality/spiritual care was measured by the Spirituality and Spiritual Care Rating Scale. The intervention’s effect on spiritual care competence was measured by the Spiritual Care Competence Scale. Proposed statistical analyses for this study included repeated measures ANOVA with post hoc analysis employing Bonferroni correction, as well as a stepwise multiple regression.

Results/Outcomes: Study data is currently being analyzed.

Conclusions/Implications: The long-term goal of this study involves improving the quality of nurses’ spiritual care for children with cancer at the end of life and their families. In addition, this study will provide a foundation for future research investigating the effects of nurses’ spiritual care on important patient care outcomes including quality of life, patient and parent satisfaction, hospice use, use of aggressive medical interventions at the end of life, and medical costs.