

## Death Anxiety and Communication Apprehension with the Dying among Nursing Students

Hye-Young, Kim<sup>1</sup>, Sung-Joong, Kim<sup>2</sup>, Young-Ran, Yeun<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dept. of Dental Hygiene, Kangwon National University,

<sup>2</sup> Dept. of Physical Therapy, Kangwon National University,

<sup>3</sup> Dept. of Nursing, Kwangwon National University,

346 Hwangjo-gil, Dogye-eup, Samcheok-si, Gangwon-do, Korea

Corresponding Author: yeunyr@kangwon.ac.kr

**Abstract.** This study aims to investigate the casual relationship among death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying among nursing students. A survey was conducted on 141 students studying in G University in South Korea and this study analyzed the data from the questionnaire with SPSS Windows 18.0. The mean of death anxiety was  $3.36\pm 0.33$ . The mean of communication apprehension with the dying was  $3.28\pm 0.32$ . There was a statistically significant and positive correlation between death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying ( $r=.54$ ,  $p=.000$ ). It has important implications in that this study forms proper attitudes toward palliative care; and provides basic data for the vitalization of the palliative care.

**Keywords:** Death, Anxiety, Communication, Nursing

### 1 Introduction

Today, palliative care becomes more and more important to terminally ill patients and their families. The emotional, social, and spiritual needs as well as physical needs of terminally ill patients increase as they approach the final moments of their lives. The ultimate goal of palliative care is to help patients meet death peacefully, which involves supporting patients to accept death as a process of life and to pursue the meaning of death with positive attitudes [1]. Palliative care comprises an integrated, multidisciplinary collaboration among patients, their families, health professionals, and the general public [2]. A nurse is a health professional who plays the most important role in providing palliative care for terminally ill patients. Due to the nature of the nursing profession, a nurse is the first person who attends to patients and their families, and responds to their demands 24 hours a day.

To provide efficient palliative care, nurses must understand the significance of providing such care. Namely, nurses must be aware of the prospect of death and overcome death anxiety while taking care of dying patients [3]. However, many studies have reported that nurses and nursing students have a hard time dealing with death, and have never been trained on how to nurse terminally ill patients and their families [4]. Therefore, the philosophy on death and the proper attitude toward death,

as well as nursing training for terminally ill patients, must be included in the curriculum of nursing education. When hospice education is systematically provided, nurses and nursing students can establish a means of coping with imminent death more actively.

This study aimed to investigate the level of death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying among nursing students; to form proper attitudes toward palliative care; and to provide basic data for the vitalization of the palliative care.

## 2 Methods

A university located in Gangwon province in Korea was selected for convenience, and a survey, targeting 150 nursing students in the university, was conducted. Nine questionnaires that were filled out insufficiently or unfaithfully were excluded, and 141 subjects' data were analyzed.

From May 10 to May 31, 2015, a survey was conducted anonymously. First, the purpose of the study was explained to the subjects, and it was informed that their responses would be processed anonymously. Then, a structured questionnaire was distributed to students who consented to participate in the study. They individually filled out the questionnaire, and an investigator directly collected the questionnaires at the site.

The collected data were entered into the computer, and were analyzed by using the SPSS/WIN 18.0 program. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the subjects' general characteristics, while the maximum, minimum, mean, and standard deviation were calculated to determine death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying. The levels of death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying according to general characteristics were tested by utilizing t-test and ANOVA. Then, the correlation between death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying was analyzed by using the Pearson's correlation coefficient.

## 3 Results

The mean of death anxiety was  $3.36 \pm 0.33$ . In the sub-domains of death anxiety, the mean of pure death anxiety was  $3.34 \pm 0.43$ ; denial of death thinking,  $3.38 \pm 0.87$ ; awareness of the shortness of time,  $3.74 \pm 0.89$ ; and fear of matters related to death,  $3.25 \pm 0.46$ . The mean of communication apprehension with the dying was  $3.28 \pm 0.32$ . The level of death anxiety was significantly higher in the group in the higher grades at the university ( $p=.042$ ), and significantly lower in the group with religion ( $p=.000$ ) (Table 3). The level of communication apprehension with the dying was statistically significantly lower in the group with religion ( $p=.000$ ).

After examining the correlation between death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying, there was a statistically significant and positive correlation between two variables ( $r=.54$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Moreover, communication apprehension with the dying had statistically significant correlations with three sub-

domains of death anxiety: pure death anxiety ( $r=.34, p=.000$ ), awareness of the shortness of time ( $r=.33, p=.000$ ), and fear of matters related to death ( $r=.45, p=.000$ ).

#### 4 Discussion

Nobody can possibly avoid or overcome death, thus all human beings have anxiety related to death. However, the more positive the attitude toward death, the lower the death anxiety [5], which may affect treatment and nursing not only for terminally ill patients but also for their families [6]. Therefore, additional training to change nursing students' attitudes toward death will be required.

Communication apprehension with the dying based on general characteristics showed a statistically significant difference, depending on religion. Direct comparison might be impossible, because there is no study targeting nursing students, but it means having a religion may affect anxiety reduction when nursing students communicate with the dying. Later, studies targeting nursing students of various universities should be conducted to further investigate the relationship between religion and communication with the dying. In this study, death anxiety had a positive correlation with communication apprehension with the dying, which was similar to the results of previous studies. Deffner and Bell [7] reported that there was a correlation between the level of the nurse's death anxiety and the degree of the nurse's ability to converse on the imminence of death with patients or their families.

Additionally, Robinson [8] emphasized that persistent training on effective communication skills could decrease the level of the nurse's death anxiety, and, at the same time, it had a positive effect on increasing comfort when discussing death with patients. Therefore, when education on palliative care is given to nursing students in the future, courses from which they can learn communication skills in dealing with terminally ill patients should be added.

#### 5 Conclusion

This is a descriptive research that investigated the level of death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying among nursing students, and identified the association between the two variables. The study targeted 141 nursing students at a university located in the Gangwon province of Korea.

The mean of death anxiety was  $3.36 \pm 0.33$  out of 5 points, and the sub-domain with the highest score was awareness of the shortness of time, followed by denial of death thinking, pure death anxiety, and fear of matters related to death. The mean of communication apprehension with the dying was  $3.28 \pm 0.32$  out of 5 points. Death anxiety had a positive correlation with communication apprehension with the dying ( $r=.54, p=.000$ ). Based on the results of this study, it is suggested to include a program in the curriculum of nursing education to reduce death anxiety and communication apprehension with the dying among nursing students.

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