

Educating Oncology Staff About the Practice of Writing Condolence Cards

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This evidence-based practice project educated staff about the practice of writing condolence cards to bereaved family members of deceased adult patients in the oncologic setting. In addition, staff were provided with the appropriate resources to incorporate this practice into their workflow. Staff were surveyed before and after completing an educational module to identify their perceived preparedness and access to resources. Staff were also surveyed six months postimplementation to identify the impact of the practice of writing condolence cards to support the grieving process on staff members and bereaved family members.

AT A GLANCE

- Bereavement practices, particularly condolence cards, can support not only family members of deceased patients but also healthcare providers during the grieving process.
- Although bereavement practices are recognized as an essential component of end-of-life care, many healthcare staff report feeling unprepared because of a lack of education and training.
- Condolence cards should be individualized for each patient and include staff members who had a relationship with the patient.

KEYWORDS

bereavement; condolence cards; grief; end-of-life care; evidence-based practice

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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While providing end-of-life care, the healthcare team cares not only for the patient but also for the patient's family members. After the death of a patient, surviving family members are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, complicated or prolonged grief, and social distress (Brekelmans et al., 2022; Efstathiou et al., 2019; Erikson & McAdam, 2020). In addition to losing their loved one, surviving family members also experience an abrupt cessation of their relationship with the healthcare team, which, in turn, can prevent closure, cause a sense of abandonment, and complicate the grieving process (Kentish-Barnes, Chevret, et al., 2017; Makarem et al., 2018).

The World Health Organization (2020) and the National Consensus Project for Quality Palliative Care (2018) consider the care of bereaved family members to be an integral part of palliative care. Bereavement practices can support family members of deceased patients and healthcare providers through the grieving process (Efstathiou et al., 2019; Takaoka et al., 2020). However, many healthcare providers report feeling unprepared to write condolence cards because of a lack of training opportunities or access to educational resources (Efstathiou et al., 2019; Porter et al., 2021).

Condolence Cards

Impact on Family Members

A condolence card can decrease the risk of prolonged grief and lower the incidence of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder among bereaved family members (Brekelmans et al., 2022). Receiving a condolence card can remind family members of the special bond that the patient and family had with the healthcare staff, validate the family members' emotional responses to the death, and inform the family members that support is available if needed (Brekelmans et al., 2022; Costa-Requena et al., 2023; Kentish-Barnes, Chevret, et al., 2017). In addition, condolence cards can provide family members with feelings of support, gratitude, reassurance, closure, increased satisfaction with and trust in the healthcare team, and appreciation for an opportunity to reflect, describe their loved one, and say goodbye to the healthcare team (Kentish-Barnes, Chevret, et al., 2017; Kentish-Barnes, Cohen-Solal, et al., 2017). Although many studies do not assess family responses because of ethical considerations, in previous studies, family members who were interviewed reported that they appreciated the gesture of receiving a condolence card and described the card as