Understanding Death

Problem

There is no more important time for a nurse to support the patient’s family than at the time of death of the patient. The nurse must understand the three major ways in which people die and the fundamental nursing differences with each type of death.

Consequence

Failure to understand the different types of death will likely result in a lack of appropriate support by the nurse for the grieving family.

Solution

Here are some considerations related to this problem.

- First, patients die suddenly from a cardiopulmonary arrest.
  - This type of death is anxiety provoking, but are in some ways, is the easiest to deal with from a medical perspective.
  - A patient is found unresponsive; a code team is summoned; and appropriate procedures are followed; in hospitals, cardiac arrest is associated with significant mortality.
  - From an emotional perspective, these deaths are often challenging because often the patient’s death is unexpected, and the family questions why and what happened.
  - For health care providers, supporting the family while having their professional care being questioned, even when nothing wrong was done, can be difficult

- Second, patients can also die when they have reached a point when advanced medical interventions are no longer desired.
  - Care changes from being aggressive to providing comfort.
At some point, either the patient or the family may decide to actively withdraw some interventions.

For the patient and the family, this may be a relief, particularly if the disease has been long and difficult; in this case death is seen as a relief from suffering.

Alternatively, withdrawal of care may occur in the acute setting, after trauma, and can be more difficult for the family to understand.

Finally, the patient may die through a pronouncement of brain death.

This type of death is most difficult for families and health care providers to understand since the patient’s heart, a traditional sign of life, is still beating.

The criteria for brain death has been well established for decades.

What is important is that brain death, while it may include the withdrawal of life supporting equipment, does not represent a choice for the family.

In brain death, the role of nurses is to support the family through their understanding of the diagnosis; to do this nurses must understand the differences between brain death and the other two types.

The nurse needs to have a good understanding of the different “types” of deaths to provide effective comfort and support to the grieving family.

References

*Avoiding Common Nursing Errors*, Lisa Marcucci, MD, Editor, Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2010.