

MASTER'S THESIS

Improving communication with terminally ill patients in the end-of-life care: a volunteers' perspective

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Abstract

Communication is an important component in care for the patients. As human beings, we are all mortal, thus, communication at the end of life is a topic that is significant for all of us. Research on communication with dying patients who suffered from incurable illness is relatively insufficient in China given the fact that palliative care originated in the West. Moreover, previous research focused more on the communication between patients and medical staff who shoulder the majority work for taking care of the patients. There is relatively little research looking into volunteers' experience in communicating with dying patients.

Communicating with dying patients is the experience that can cause anxiety and stress. As patients with advanced and incurable cancers have exhausted their social contacts due to the prolonged illnesses and people's general anxiety to communicate with dying people, their shrinking social contacts will result in isolation, which will trigger emotional pain in addition to the physical pain. Volunteers come to assist in caring for them as a form of social support for the dying people, and their communication experience is valuable for any caregivers of dying patients.

The researcher of the study directly engaged with the activities of a group of volunteers in Shenzhen for six months, doing ethnography and semi-structured interviews, so as to understand the practices and meanings of volunteers' communication with dying patients.

The results showed that three main dimensions emerged, namely, isolation and connection, dependence and autonomy, discontinuity and continuity. Volunteers adopted various communication skills so as to make patients feel that they are still connected to others, enjoy certain degree of autonomy over their body like the healthy people and let them move on in the last phase of their life. They also suggest that there should be more investigations in the end-of-life communication.

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