



# Position Statement

## Nurses' role in providing care to dying patients and their families

### ICN Position:

Nurses are uniquely prepared to offer compassionate and skilled care for dying patients and their families. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) views the nurse's role as fundamental to a palliative approach that aims to reduce suffering and improve the quality of life for dying patients and their families through early assessment, identification and management of pain and physical, social, psychological, spiritual and cultural needs. ICN views access to pain and other symptom relief medication and interventions as a basic human right and as part of the right to die with dignity.

ICN supports national nurses associations in their endeavours to:

- Advocate for national or regional legislation that fully endorses the principles of this policy statement.
- Support nurses dealing with complex palliative care issues related to death and dying, including compassionate and skilled care, and pain and symptom management during the end stage of life; respecting the patient's will and ethical standards and cultural norms in death and mourning; and addressing the support and bereavement needs of family members in homes, hospital settings, hospices, nursing homes and other places where terminal care is provided.
- Advocate for nurse participation in multidisciplinary approaches, including ethics review committees, to care for dying patients and their families.
- Promote nursing care that respects ethical principles and cultural values based on relevant legislation.
- Enhance involvement of nurses in discussions, policy and legislation related to issues of death and dying including care of dying patients and their families.
- Promote integration of the following into basic and post-basic nursing curriculum: understanding a palliative approach, skills in pain and symptom assessment and management, respect for cultural values, the right of dying patients to make informed decisions, including the right to choose or to refuse treatment, the right to be free from pain and suffering, as far as possible, and the right to a dignified death.

### Background:

Increasingly people are living longer and have a range of chronic and complex illnesses that are life limiting. A palliative approach has much to offer to them and their families. Nurses have a responsibility to be knowledgeable and skilled in providing care to dying patients and their families.

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Dying persons and their families have cultural beliefs and values. Nurses must provide culturally sensitive and holistic care that respects spiritual and religious beliefs. A caring and supportive environment that acknowledges the inevitability of death helps family members to accept and deal with loss and grieving.

Advances in life-sustaining procedures and changes in societal values about quality of life have raised ethical dilemmas in nursing. The current debate mainly focuses on medically assisted dying. However other issues are equally important, such as withholding or withdrawing treatment, patient directives and choices or "living wills" through advance care planning and concerns for quality of life. A living will gives patients the right to provide instructions on whether or not treatment and other life-sustaining measures will be implemented.

The role of nurses and other health care professionals in caring for dying patients continues to be debated and nurses must be knowledgeable about the current issues and legislation about end stage of life issues.

The alleviation of pain and suffering is a fundamental nursing responsibility and nurses are trained in pain management, palliative care and in helping people in dealing with grief, death and dying. The quality of care during the end stage of life greatly contributes to peaceful and dignified death and provides support to family members in dealing with their loss and grieving process.

**Adopted in 2000**

**Reviewed and revised in 2006 and in 2012**

**Related ICN Position:**

- Nurses and Primary Health Care
- Nurses and Human Rights

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.