

Nursing Students' Awareness of Death and Attitudes Toward Caring For The Dying

Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Ölüme İlişkin Farkındalığı Ve Ölmekte Olan Bireye Bakım Vermeye Yönelik Tutumları

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ABSTRACT

Background & Aim: Although death is a part of life, nursing students/nurses may feel sadness and distress when faced with a patient's death. This research aimed to evaluate the awareness of death and approach towards caring for dying patients among undergraduate nursing students.

Methods & Materials: A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out with 323 nursing students, and data were collected using a personal information form, the Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure (MMAM), and the Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying Scale (FATCOD). Statistical analysis was performed by independent sample t-test and one-way analysis of variance.

Results: No significant relationship was found between MMAM and FATCOD scale scores. Furthermore, it was observed that the Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying Scale and Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure scores of the students who said they fear death was higher.

Conclusion: In this study, no relationship was found between fear of death and attitude towards dying patients. Our study suggests that nursing education should address students' fear of death and provide death-oriented education to improve coping skills.

Keywords: death; nursing students; nursing care

ÖZ

Giriş ve Amaç: Ölüm yaşamın bir parçası olmasına rağmen, hemşirelik öğrencileri/hemşireler bir hastanın ölümüyle karşılaşmalarında üzüntü ve sıkıntı hissedebilirler. Bu araştırma, hemşirelik lisans öğrencilerinin ölüme ilişkin farkındalıklarını ve ölmekte olan hastaların bakımına yönelik yaklaşımlarını değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Gereç ve Yöntem: Tanımlayıcı ve kesitsel tipteki araştırma 323 hemşirelik öğrencisi ile yürütülmüş, veriler kişisel bilgi formu, Çok Boyutlu Ölüm Farkındalığı Ölçeği (ÇBÖFÖ) ve Frommelt Ölmekte Olan Hastanın Bakımına Yönelik Tutum Ölçeği (FATCOD) kullanılarak toplanmıştır. İstatistiksel analiz bağımsız örneklem t-testi ve tek yönlü varyans analizi ile gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Bulgular: ÇBÖFÖ ve FATCOD arasında anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmamıştır. Ayrıca, ölümden korktuğunu söyleyen öğrencilerin Frommelt Ölmekte Olan Hastanın Bakımına Yönelik Tutum Ölçeği ve Çok Boyutlu Ölüm Farkındalığı Ölçeği puanlarının daha yüksek olduğu görülmüştür.

Sonuç: Bu çalışmada ölüm korkusu ve ölmekte olan hastaya yönelik tutum arasında bir ilişki bulunmadı. Araştırmamız, hemşirelik eğitiminin öğrencilerin ölüm korkusunu ele almasını ve baş etme becerilerini geliştirmek için ölüm odaklı eğitim vermesini önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ölüm, hemşirelik öğrencisi, hemşirelik bakımı

Introduction

Death is an inescapable process that all living organisms experience. Medically, death is defined as the irreversible cessation of function in all systems of the organism (1). However, the concept of death differs among societies and cultures and therefore has varied definitions. A natural death is not an event that one can discuss and determine

where and how it will occur. Although some people and their relatives prefer to die at home, in some cases, it is impossible (2) People accept death as a part of life and continue their lives. A disproportionately intense, pathological fear of death can adversely affect an individual's mental health (3). As is the case with the definition of death, approach towards death vary according to personality, society, religion, and culture. People can also form positive or negative approach towards death based on their personal experiences with it (4).

Nurses encounter death more frequently than other members of society. Although death is a part of life, nurses and nursing students should

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Gönderim Tarihi: 01.02.2024 - Kabul Tarihi: 12.04.2025

consider each death holistically for individual patients and their families (2) Nurses find that caring for terminal patients and being present at their time of death are some of their most difficult experiences. At such times, nurses and nursing students may feel sadness, strain, helplessness, and distress. They may be susceptible to the detrimental effects of these negative emotions (5,6) which can sometimes lead to psychosocial and somatic symptoms and adversely impact their lives (5). During vocational training, students work with terminal patients, care for terminal patients and their families, and sometimes lose patients. These experiences can result in negative emotions and thoughts and stressful experiences for students (7). Bahceli et al. (2022) qualitative study of undergraduate nursing students found that these students were badly affected by the death of a patient and relived it in their dreams (8). To provide holistic care to terminal patients and their families, nursing students should recognize and learn to control their feelings and thoughts about death before graduation (5,9). Thus, students need and want more education on end-of-life nursing care. As these prospective nurses will soon join the healthcare team, determining their approach towards death and increasing their awareness are vital. Promoting positive approach towards death and teaching nursing students coping methods applicable to both their professional and private lives will improve the quality of holistic end-of-life care they provide to individuals and their families (10). Few studies in the literature have examined nursing students' awareness of death and their approach towards caring for dying patients. Hence, this research aimed to determine such awareness and attitudes, as well as associated factors, among undergraduate nursing students in Turkey, using a descriptive, cross-sectional study conducted via an online survey.

Methods

Study design

This descriptive, cross-sectional study was carried out between January 15 and April 15, 2021, in Turkey. Nursing students attending two different faculties of health sciences in north

of Turkey's cities were included in the study. Nursing students who were currently taking or had previously taken the Internal Medicine Nursing course between January 15 and April 15, 2021 and who volunteered to participate in the study were included. Internal Medicine Nursing course is given in the 2nd grade. The content of this course includes the physiopathology and nursing care of all chronic diseases. At the same time, the palliative care process and nursing care are also mentioned in this course.

Data collection

Data collection forms were sent to nursing students via the online word processor Google Docs. Because the data were taken during the Covid-19 pandemic period and students received distance education during this period, the link created in the whatsapp class groups of the students was shared. Before starting the survey, information about the research was given. All students were able to participate in the survey after reading and accepting the online informed consent forms. The population was approximately 500 nursing students. Nursing students who were currently taking or had previously taken the Internal Medicine Nursing course and volunteered to participate in the study were included ($N = 323$). We utilized the MInCir Initiative checklist used for observational and descriptive studies (11). 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students participated in the study. An equal number of students were accepted from both institutions, half and half.

Instruments

Data were collected using a personal information form created by scanning the literature, the Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure (MMAM), and the Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying (FATCOD) scale. Before using the tools, permission was obtained from the authors who performed the Turkish validity and reliability testing.

Personal information form: This form comprised 17 questions about students' sociodemographic characteristics (7 questions, age, gender, marital status...) and their opinions/approach towards

death (10 questions) (Table 1). The questions related to students' attitudes toward death were prepared as a result of the researchers' review of the literature (7,8,9,12,13,14).

Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure: The MMAM comprised 30 items with 5 factors (inheritance, fear, acceptance, disempowerment, and disengagement). The original scale was enhanced by Levasseur et al. (2015) with 36 items and 5 factors. The scale measures people's awareness of death. The scale subscales are mortality fearfulness (11 items), mortality legacy (7 items), mortality acceptance (5 items), mortality disengagement (4 items), and mortality disempowerment (3 items). The items are rated from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) (12). The Turkish validity and reliability analyses of the scale were performed by Bulut et al. (2017) (13). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was found to be 0.79. The Turkish version created by Bulut et al. was used in our study. There are no reverse-coded items in the scale. Therefore, it is accepted that death awareness is high when high total scores are obtained. Permission was obtained from the authors via e-mail.

Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying scale: The FATCOD scale comprised 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Items 1, 2, 4, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, and 30 are positive, whereas the other items are negatively worded. When scoring, items containing negative attitudes are reversed and added to the positive answers to obtain a total score. The total point ranges from 30 to 150; the higher the point, the greater the positive attitude. The scale was created by Katherine H. Murray Frommelt (1988), and the scale was translated into Turkish by Çevik (2010). Çevik and Kav (2013) performed the validity testing of the Turkish version of FATCOD (14). This Turkish version of FATCOD was used in our study. Permission was obtained from the authors via e-mail.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 25.0 software (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY) was used to analyze the data. Percentages,

independent sample t-tests, and one-way analysis of variance were used to analyse the data. The level of significance in the analysis results is $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Confirmation for the study was acquired from the ethics committee of a state university (11.02.2021/18). Permissions were also obtained from the institutions where the research would be conducted before starting the research. The students were asked about their attitudes towards this issue since they will also care for dying patients. All participants in the study provided consent through online informed consent forms. Since the data collection was done online, the researchers have no information about which students participated in the study. Students who wanted to participate in the study participated in the study. Participants were informed about the study, and their permission to attend was acquired. All instructions of the Helsinki Declaration were followed.

Results

In this section, findings related to nursing students' fear of death and attitudes towards dying patients were discussed. Sociodemographic characteristics of nursing students are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the nursing students (n=323) (Çankırı/Kastamonu, 2021)

Sociodemographic characteristics		n	%
Age	18-19	41	12.7
	20-21	177	54.8
	>22	105	32.5
Gender	Female	275	85.1
Marital status	Single	317	98.1
Year of class	Second Year	137	42.4
	Third Year	119	36.8
	Fourth Year	67	20.7
Main area of residence	Urban	244	75.8
Presence of physician-diagnosed chronic disease	No	290	89.8
Regular medication use	No	288	89.2
Previous experience of loss	Yes	200	62.3
Loss of a first-degree relative in the last year	No	294	91.0
Previously cared for a dying individual	No	242	74.9
Experienced anxiety while caring for a dying individual	No	220	68.1
Experienced helplessness/hopelessness while caring for a dying individual	No	206	63.8
Encountered death in the family/clinical practice setting	Yes	266	82.4
Felt fear when faced with a death event	No	226	70.0
Thought that the deceased person's suffering is over when faced with a death event	Yes	230	71.2
Felt neutral or considered it natural when faced with a death event	No	200	61.9
Fear of death	Yes	205	63.5

Table 2. Distribution of total scores on the Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure and Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying Scale (Çankırı/Kastamonu, 2021)

Scale	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure	125.61	125.00	63.00	185.00	17.56
Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying Scale	78.61	80.00	49.00	104.00	8.36

SD: Standard deviation

The distribution of the total scores of the MMAM and FATCOD is given in Table 2.

The distribution of the MMAM subscale scores is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure Subscale Scores (Çankırı/Kastamonu, 2021)

Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure Subscale Scores	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Mortality fearfulness	3.50	3.45	1.00	7.00	1.19
Mortality legacy	5.36	5.43	1.00	7.00	1.09
Mortality acceptance	5.43	5.60	2.00	6.80	0.67
Mortality disengagement	3.42	3.25	1.25	7.00	1.08
Mortality disempowerment	2.91	3.00	1.00	6.33	1.19

SD: Standard deviation

Table 4. Correlation of Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure and Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying Scale Scores (Çankırı/Kastamonu, 2021)

Scale	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD	r/p
Multidimensional Mortality Awareness Measure	125.61	63.00	185.00	17.56	-0.058 0.298
Frommelt Attitude Toward the Care of the Dying Scale	78.61	49.00	104.00	8.36	

When MMAM and FATCOD scores were analyzed, it was seen that there was no significant relationship between the two scales (see Table 4).

When the scale scores were analyzed based on sociodemographic characteristics, we observed a significant gender difference in MMAM scores (According to the Mann Whitney U test result $U=4948.5$; $p=0.006$), with women having higher scores. MMAM total score differed significantly based on how the students answered the question “Did you feel neutral or regard it as natural when you encountered a death event?”, with those answering no having higher scores (According to the Mann Whitney U test result $U=10012.5$; $p=0.005$). Also, students who said they fear death also had significantly higher MMAM scores (According to the Mann Whitney U test result $U=6987$; $p<0.001$). There was a difference in MMAM scores between classes, with the mean score of third-year students being lower than that of second-year students (According to the Kruskal Wallis H test result $H=12.078$; $p=0.002$).

On the FATCOD, we noted that students who said they fear death had remarkably higher scores than

those who said they did not (According to the Mann Whitney U test result $U=10409.5$; $p=0.037$). There was also a considerable difference in FATCOD scores between the age groups (According to the Kruskal Wallis H test result $H=7.865$; $p=0.02$), with a significantly higher mean score among students aged 18-19 compared to the 20-21 and >22 age groups. Apart from these significant differences, there was no significant difference between FATCOD and MMAM and other socio-demographic characteristics ($p>0.05$).

Discussion

In our study, it was specified that the generality of the students perceived providing care to a dying individual as a natural process. Also, we determined that most of the students were afraid of death (63.5%). When the literature was examined, it was seen that students perceived death as a natural event in a similar way, even if they experienced sadness. This showed that the sense of caregiving was prominent among the students. Grief and hopelessness are feelings most widely experienced by nurses while caring for dying patients, according to a study by Karadag

et al. (2019) (15). In a qualitative study conducted by Göçmen Baykara et al. (2022) with medical and nursing students, the most frequently used expressions about death were “this is a natural process” and “just like birth, which makes us happy and is seen as normal, death is a part of life; in this sense, it is similar to birth”(16). Besides, Özdemir Köken et al. (2020) investigated nursing students’ feelings, thoughts, and approach towards caring for dying patients and determined that nursing students experienced feelings of intense sadness, helplessness, and inadequacy while caring for dying patients, with the main reasons for their sense of inadequacy being a lack of experience, knowledge, and skills (17).

In our study, we found that nursing students had an affirmative approach towards caring for the dying. Former studies in the literature also indicated that students generally have a positive attitude. Ceyhan et al. (2018) conducted a study to reveal nurses’ approach towards the concept of a good death and its effect on patient care in the terminal period. Their results indicated that nurses’ attitudes during care for dying patients were at a moderate level and that they perceived death as a positive experience when appropriate care was given (18). In a study by Cerit (2019) evaluating the effect of education on first-year nursing students’ approach towards death and the care of dying patients, the students had FATCOD scores of 103.02 and 111.02 before and after the education, respectively (19). Grubb and Arthur (2016), using FATCOD, found that student nurses had a positive attitude toward the care of dying people with an average score of 75.9 (20). Karadag et al. (2019) investigated the religious and cultural factors affecting nurses’ attitudes and determined that nurses in both the east and the west had high mean scores on the FATCOD. This indicated a positive approach towards death (98.27 for nurses in the east, 97.19 for nurses in the west) (15). In the study conducted by Gürdoğan et al. (2019) to determine the relationship between death anxiety in nursing students and their approaches to care for dying patients, the mean FATCOD-Form B scale score was found to be 105.09 (21). In another study to identify Swedish first-year

nursing students’ approach towards the care of dying patients, Hagelin et al. (2016) reported a generally positive attitude among nursing students at the beginning of the first semester, with a mean total FATCOD score of 119.5 (22). Zhou et al. (2021) recently conducted a study in China assessing nursing students’ knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy in alleviant care and the relationships between these variables. The students’ mean total FATCOD score was 101.34, and most of the students scored above the 65% threshold, indicating a positive approach towards caring for dying patients (23). Özdemir Köken et al. (2020) reported that the mean FATCOD score of nursing students was 92.83 in their study . In their qualitative study investigating the attitudes of healthcare students toward caring for terminal patients (17). Juvet et al. (2021) found that their attitudes were generally positive and that most of the participants thought that supporting dying patients was a way to achieve efficient satisfaction. Yet, majority of the students reported feeling inadequate and inexperienced in alleviant care (24). Sanli and Iltus (2020) evaluated the end-of-life care significances and behaviors of senior nursing students and their approach towards death and found that the students had affirmative approaches and behaviors toward end-of-life care and believed that death was a natural part of life and that there was life after passing (25).

In our study, we observed significant differences in MMAM scores according to the participants’ gender, their year of study, and their answers to questions about whether they felt neutral or regarded it as natural when they encountered a death event. We also noted significant differences in FATCOD scores by age group. Similar results are reported in the literature. Jeong et al. (2020) reported in their systematic review that nurses’ and nursing students’ approach towards hospice and alleviant care in maintaining high-quality services for fatally ill patients and their families were positively associated with experience caring for the dying, career or education level, knowledge and education about hospice and alleviant care, religiosity, education and anxiety about death, and age (26). Hagelin et al. (2016)

reported that older students, students with both early care experience and earlier education, those who have met a dying person, and students born in Sweden reported more positive attitudes, suggesting that students' approach towards care of the dying may be influenced by age, early care, and education, experiences meeting a dying person, and birthplace (22). Grubb and Arthur (2016) reported that the duration of education and practical experience in caring for dying individuals were dividedly associated with nursing students' positive approach towards caring for the dying (20). In a study of the relationship between nursing students' approach towards death and senses of spiritual care, Karadag (2020) observed a remarkable positive relationship between the mean Spirituality and Spiritual Care Rating Scale and FATCOD scores and reported that students who received education on spiritual care and death along their nursing education had more positive approach towards caring for dying patients and higher senses of spirituality/spiritual care (27). Álvarez et al. (2020) evaluated strengths and weaknesses in terms of facing death and the dying process in the hospital setting as described by nursing students and determined that strengths included previous death experience, and support from a guidance nurse while at the hospital. Also, the weaknesses included lack of experience, psychological immaturity and the few tools they possess, patient-related factors such as age, and emotional bonds formed with the patient, which may cause the student to suffer (28). Ünlü and Uludağ (2021) showed that among Turkish medical students, higher age and year of study were associated with more positive approach towards death and dying and lower empathy levels (29). Gillan et al. (2021) evaluated the personal and professional/clinical death and death experiences of undergraduate nursing students and found that good death experiences occurred when there were nurses present to guide students through the experience, whereas bad death experiences were associated with undignified care, ritual post-mortem care, and the physical coldness of the deceased person and the environment (30). In addition, when the MMAM scores were analyzed in our study, it was observed that the mean score

of third year students was lower than that of second grade students. It was thought that the reason for this situation may be that the second year students had just taken the Internal Medicine Nursing course. In addition, it was thought that this difference developed because the fourth year students were more mature.

Nurses' and physicians' perceptions of death affect their approach towards dying patients. In particular, in the present study, we found that the MMAM scores and FATCOD scores of the students who said they were afraid of death were significantly higher. The reason for this might be that the research data were collected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period and that there was an increase in death anxiety in our students, as in the rest of the world. On this subject, we can say that leading students' perceptions of death in a positive direction will have a favorable impact on their attitudes on the care of terminal patients (17).

Limitations

This research was a descriptive research carried out with students attending the nursing department of two health sciences faculties. For this reason, the limitations of the study include the fact that the research was conducted only in universities located in two provinces and the sample was small. In addition, conducting the research during the COVID-19 pandemic and providing data online are among the limitations of the study. Nursing students participating in the study received training on palliative care.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we observed no significant relationship between death awareness and approach towards care in the nursing students in our study. However, we found that some sociodemographic factors were associated with their level of awareness and attitudes. According to the results of the research, it is important to consider students' fear of death, especially in nursing education, and to provide death-oriented education to improve coping skills. This is certain to contribute to students' adjustment to and

acceptance of death during vocational training. For these reasons, we believe that this should be taken into consideration in the holistic approach to nursing students and nursing curriculum development.

Acknowledgments

We thank the nursing students who attended in this study.

Disagreement Of Interests

None.

Funding

None.

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