

Who's Job Is It Anyway? Working to Improve Serious Illness Communication Skills across Disciplines

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Objectives

Following the capstone poster presentation, the learner will be able to:

- Describe barriers to conversations imposed by role ambiguity
- Discuss an Emergency Department nurse-specific education intervention and results on confidence approaching difficult conversations
- Identify possible further training or experiences to continue skill development

Serious illness conversations are essential for providing goal-concordant, high-quality care. Current consensus guidelines encourage incorporation of communication about goals of care early and often for patients facing serious illness, yet clinicians are often left wondering, whose job is it to engage in these conversations? Role ambiguity can result in missed opportunities to help patients and families navigate complex decision-making throughout the course of their illness. Engaging palliative care specialists to train and coach practicing clinicians is a possible model for extending the reach of expert palliative care communication skills.

The Emergency Department is one of many clinical settings seeing increasing volumes of seriously-ill patients at all points of their illness trajectory, and nurses are on the frontlines providing and coordinating care that commonly involves urgent decision-making. Emergency Department nurses should be adequately prepared to assist these seriously ill patients and their caregivers by employing advanced communication skills. This capstone project utilized an innovative communication education intervention to provide specialized professional development for Emergency Department Registered Nurses based on the VitalTalk™ interactive teaching methodology. Eleven RNs participated in a full day training that included didactic learning, demonstration, and roll play. Emergency Department-specific cases were developed for this course to enhance applicability. After the course, nurses rated their confidence in elements of challenging conversations such as, “eliciting a patient’s goals of care,” compared to looking back at their confidence before the course. The intervention illustrated a significant increase in confidence in all areas measured. Follow-up questions with participants indicated that opportunities for ongoing skills practice and repetition are desired forms of future professional development. Potential strategies for maintaining and building on existing communication skills include regularly scheduled skills refresher events, and/or daily or weekly palliative care coaching rounds to promote confidence in and utilization of skills.