APA Official Actions

Position Statement on Role of Psychiatrists in Palliative Care

Approved by the Board of Trustees, December 2018
Approved by the Assembly, November 2018

“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. These are position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects.” – APA Operations Manual

Issue:
Palliative care is a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to the treatment of persons with serious illness. Its focus includes both life-limiting and life-threatening conditions, many of which are frequently complicated by psychiatric disorders or symptoms. Palliative care places special emphasis on early identification, assessment, and treatment of pain and other physical symptoms. It also addresses social, cultural, ethical, legal, and spiritual considerations in patient care with the goals of preventing and relieving suffering and distress as well as enhancing quality of life. Palliative care physicians have expertise in the management of distressing symptoms such as dyspnea, nausea, and constipation. Their training in advanced disease trajectories and communication skills prepares them to engage in productive ongoing dialogues about prognosis and treatment options with patients and their families. They have expertise in the ongoing assessment of patients’ goals of care to ensure that medical choices are consistent with patients’ preferences. They remain engaged with patients throughout the course of illness. The American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology is a founding board of the ACGME approved fellowship in Hospice and Palliative Care. Patients with serious mental illness, major neurocognitive disorder with behavioral disturbance, and other psychiatric comorbidities are best served when specialized psychiatric care is integrated into palliative care services.

APA Position:
Patients with psychiatric illness would benefit from greater access to palliative care, and many patients receiving palliative care develop serious psychiatric comorbidities requiring expert psychiatric management. The APA supports efforts to increase training in palliative care during psychiatric residency and encourages practicing psychiatrists to expand their knowledge of palliative care.

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