Training tomorrow’s leaders in palliative care is critical

Throughout Europe palliative care is an increasingly important public health issue due to aging populations, growing numbers of people dying from advanced disease, and insufficient attention paid to their complex needs and the needs of their families. The welcome focus of palliative care on the needs of both patients and families has certainly contributed to its rapid development.

This has resulted in new demands being placed on the qualifications of those working in palliative care, as well as on the systems for providing them with advanced training and education. Developing a highly skilled workforce is critical. It is equally critical to develop leadership knowledge and skills. To improve and expand palliative care, we need to train future leaders, new pioneers who will assume leadership responsibilities and be able to deal with complex political and organisational healthcare structures, as well as with uncertain situations.

As explained by Professor John P Kotter,1 one must differentiate between leadership and management. A manager is skilled in organising processes, planning and controlling. A leader is a visionary who motivates, inspires and facilitates change. These two contrasting sets of talents are best applied in combination. Leaders need to be ‘good situation sensors’:2 They need to be able to reveal their weaknesses, show ‘tough empathy’, be authentic, build up trust, generate solidarity and empower the members of their teams. They need to be confident enough to be different.

In palliative care, leaders need to display awareness of ethical and professional issues in both end-of-life and organisational decision-making. They should adopt the roles of autodidactic learner, critical evaluator and researcher. Effective communication skills and the ability to collaborate with stakeholders, colleagues, patients and relatives are vital. A leader in palliative care has to combine a wide range of competences and personal characteristics: medical expertise, management skills and leadership qualities.

There are several further education programmes in palliative care across Europe, but palliative care leadership as a specific topic does not seem to be widely covered. Some programmes are focused on one country or one professional group. We think that the best way to advance palliative care leadership is through multiprofessional exchange, within training programmes where people from different countries bring their examples of best practice and ideas. A cross-border dialogue with colleagues has concrete benefits, as there is always something to learn from models and approaches that have been tried and tested elsewhere.

The University of Southampton in the UK offers a master of science focusing on clinical leadership in cancer, palliative and end-of-life care. It aims to help students improve their clinical skills and expert knowledge so that they are able to lead high-quality care and bring about policy change in their specialist areas.3

Another example is the on-site leadership course that we offer at the European Palliative Care Academy (EUPCA).4 The EUPCA is a joint project of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, University Hospital Cologne (Germany), Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun (Poland), Hospice Casa Sperantei in Brasov (Romania) and King’s College London (UK). The course aims to broaden participants’ horizons by giving them insights into different healthcare systems and examples of best practice. Students spend one week at each academic institution and work on a continual personal project.

These courses help participants to critically reflect on their personal and professional development, to enhance their capacity for decision-making in unpredictable and complex situations, and to address future challenges in palliative care, both nationally and internationally.

Capacity building in palliative care must include the fostering of leadership skills: our ever-growing field places demands on us to be good leaders so that we can effectively respond to demographic and societal change.

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References
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