Knowledge, Perceptions, and Beliefs of Palliative Care by Primary Health Providers

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Many people diagnosed with serious illnesses are troubled by extreme symptoms that dramatically affect their quality of life and often cause pain, disability, and suffering. Palliative care, now considered a medical specialty, provides multidimensional evidence-based care proven to decrease their symptom burden and improve quality of life. Referral for palliative care differs from hospice care requirements but misinformation often clouds the decision to request palliative care consultation and results in lack of referral. Research studies have identified several key factors that influence appropriate referral for palliative care. For example, studies found that some primary healthcare providers did not understand the process or realize the key role palliative care plays to decrease suffering and improve quality of life for both patient and family caregivers. Therefore, education for healthcare providers is noted as an important intervention associated with improvement in referral to palliative care providers. In 2019, the Center to Advance Palliative Care systematically evaluated each state in the US and graded their provision of palliative care services to appropriate patient populations. Alabama received a grade of ‘D’ for provision of palliative care in hospitals. To improve this poor rating, it is imperative to examine factors that negatively influence referral for palliative care. This includes determining the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about palliative care of practicing healthcare providers in the Huntsville area. The UAH CON Palliative Care research team will survey healthcare providers to identify methods to improve palliative referral, their preferred modality of education and specific topics to be addressed in the program content. The information gained in the initial study will be used to create a targeted educational program to address the identified barriers. This educational program will be piloted, evaluated, refined, and possibly disseminated across rural areas of Alabama to address regions lacking palliative care.

Students who chose to participate in this research study will participate in an ongoing literature review to gain knowledge about palliative care’s value to decrease pain and suffering for the seriously ill. They will learn strategies for data collection using online surveys and interviews as well as data entry for statistical analysis of subject responses. Undergraduate students who participate in the Summer Research program will participate in Palliative Care Research Team meetings and data analysis discussions. In the future the team hopes to expand the research initiated in the northern Alabama area across underserved areas of the state to begin to improve palliative care services for those with serious illness.