

Everyone Dies: Expanding the Nurse's Role in Public Education About Serious Illness, Dying, and Bereavement



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Nurses have always been at the center of some of life's most difficult moments. We translate complex information, support families in crisis, and help people navigate decisions. Yet even with this proximity to serious illness and death, many patients and families arrive unprepared. Conversations about dying are often delayed, avoided, or framed in ways that limit understanding. The result is confusion, fear, and decisions made without clarity.

Everyone Dies is a nonprofit organization working to close that gap. Its mission is straightforward: provide accessible, research-informed public education about serious illness, dying, death, and bereavement, and normalize these conversations as a natural part of the life cycle. For nurses, this work is not separate from clinical care. It is an extension of it.

Why This Work Matters in Nursing Practice

In clinical settings, nurses routinely encounter the consequences of limited public understanding about end-of-life care. Patients may not know the difference between palliative care and hospice. Families may not understand what the dying process looks like. Advance directives are often incomplete or absent. Expectations are shaped more by media portrayals than by reality.

This lack of preparation places additional burden on nurses. We become the interpreters not only of medical information, but of the experience itself. We are asked to answer questions that could have been explored earlier, often under time pressure and emotional strain.

Public education changes that dynamic. When patients and families have a foundational understanding before a crisis occurs, conversations shift. Questions become more focused. Decisions are more aligned with values. The nurse's role remains essential, but the starting point is different.

The Everyone Dies Approach

Everyone Dies addresses this need through multiple channels, all designed to meet people where they are and in language they can understand.

The organization produces a weekly podcast that discusses topics such as recognizing the signs of dying, understanding hospice care, navigating grief, and communicating preferences for end-of-life care. The tone is direct, compassionate, and grounded in clinical reality. It avoids jargon while maintaining accuracy, making it accessible to both the general public and healthcare professionals.

In addition to the podcast, Everyone Dies provides written resources, infographics, and community education that break down complex topics into clear, usable information. These materials are particularly valuable for nurses who need patient-friendly tools to reinforce teaching in clinical settings.

The organization also maintains an active online presence, including daily availability to respond to questions from the public. This level of accessibility allows individuals to seek guidance outside of formal healthcare encounters, often before a crisis develops.

Supporting Nurses at the Bedside

For nurses, the value of this work is practical. It provides language, frameworks, and educational tools that can be integrated directly into patient care.

When discussing prognosis, for example, nurses often balance honesty with compassion. Having access to consistent, publicly available resources allows patients and families to revisit information at their own pace. It also reinforces what has been discussed at the bedside, reducing misunderstanding.

In hospice and palliative care settings,

where nurses frequently address anticipatory grief and symptom progression, educational materials from Everyone Dies can support conversations about what to expect. This can reduce anxiety and help families feel more prepared for the changes they are witnessing.

Even outside of end-of-life specialties, nurses encounter patients with chronic or life-limiting conditions. Introducing concepts such as advance care planning, goals of care, and realistic expectations can be challenging. Public education initiatives like Everyone Dies create a foundation that makes these conversations more approachable.

Normalizing Conversations About Death

One of the most significant barriers in end-of-life care is not a lack of clinical knowledge, but a reluctance to talk about death. Cultural norms often position death as something to be avoided in conversation, which delays planning and limits understanding.

Everyone Dies works to normalize these discussions. By presenting death as a natural part of the life cycle rather than an exceptional event, the organization helps reduce the stigma associated with talking about it. This aligns closely with nursing values of holistic care, which include addressing not only physical needs but also emotional, social, and existential concerns.

For nurses, this normalization has tangible effects. When patients are more open to discussing death, it becomes easier to explore their preferences, address fears, and provide care that is consistent with their goals.

Implications for Nursing Education and Leadership

The work of Everyone Dies also has implications beyond individual patient encounters. Nursing

education has historically emphasized clinical skills and disease management, with less structured focus on communicating about dying and death. Integrating public education resources into curricula could help bridge this gap.

Nurse leaders and educators can use materials from Everyone Dies to support training in communication, advance care planning, and bereavement support. These resources can

also be incorporated into community outreach programs, extending the impact beyond the clinical setting.

A Shared Goal

At its core, the mission of Everyone Dies is aligned with the goals of nursing: to support individuals and families through some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives with clarity, compassion, and respect.

Public education does not replace the nurse's role. It strengthens it. When patients and families come to the bedside with a clearer understanding of serious illness and dying, nurses are better able to do what they do best—provide care that is informed, intentional, and centered on what matters most to the person in front of them. ■

Listen to the Everyone Dies podcast
www.every1dies.org

Maximizing Impact: How Nurse Educators Are Shaping the Future of Care

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Nursing has always been grounded in presence. At the bedside, in the community, and alongside patients during critical moments, nurses deliver skilled and compassionate care. Yet, the influence of nursing extends far beyond direct patient interactions. Increasingly, nurses are shaping outcomes through education, mentorship, community presence, and leadership.

For many nurses early in their careers, the path forward often feels linear: gain experience, pursue certification, and advance within a specialty. While this remains essential, it is not the only avenue for meaningful impact. Serving as faculty in an academic nursing program represents a powerful and often under-recognized career pathway.

Nurse Faculty as a Career Path

The role of the nurse educator has evolved significantly. Today's faculty are responsible not only for delivering content, but for preparing nurses to think critically, navigate complexity, and lead in dynamic healthcare environments. This requires clinical expertise, strong communication skills, and a commitment to lifelong learning. Today's nurse faculty must teach the concepts of sustainable change, as our clinical environments thrive on innovation.

Choosing a path in academia does not mean stepping away from patient care, in fact many of the best educators maintain a close connection to the acute care environment.

For nurses drawn to teaching, mentorship, or system-level impact, faculty roles offer an opportunity to shape our profession at scale. A single educator may influence dozens of students each year, with a ripple effect that reaches countless patients over time.

There is also a growing need to introduce this pathway earlier. Exposure to teaching, precepting, and mentorship can help novice nurses see education as an attainable and meaningful career direction rather than a distant endpoint.

Reflecting on Dual Impact

An often-overlooked contribution to nursing education is the role of clinicians who serve as adjunct faculty. Nurses actively practicing in acute care bring a level of relevance that cannot be replicated through theory alone. As healthcare continues to evolve rapidly, academic programs depend on these perspectives to ensure teaching reflects what is happening in practice today.

The acute care environment is shaped by constant change, including advances in technology, rising patient acuity, and increasing system complexity. Nurses in these settings develop real-time insight into clinical decision-making, teamwork, and operational challenges. When they teach, they bring a practical lens that strengthens learning and keeps it grounded.

This dual role bridges practice and academia, ensuring education remains applicable and aligned with real-world care. Encouraging acute care nurses to engage in adjunct roles strengthens both education and practice. It reinforces a shared responsibility to not only deliver care, but to shape how it evolves.

Looking Ahead

As healthcare continues to evolve, so must the way nurses are prepared. Nurse educators will remain central to this progress by fostering critical thinking, supporting professional growth, and strengthening the nursing workforce in meaningful and measurable ways.

For those in practice today, there is an opportunity to contribute in a powerful way. Consider how serving in an adjunct teaching role could be a meaningful extension of your impact. Sharing your knowledge, experience, and perspective is not only valuable but also a lasting contribution to the profession and to the nurses who will carry it forward. ■

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References online:
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