Aim: To test the feasibility of an educational intervention about existential issues for nurses in surgical care, and to describe care attitudes towards patients dying of cancer. Specific aims were to explore the effects on nurses' estimated confidence in communication and reflections on existential issues.

Methods: The intervention included five 90 minute sessions with theoretical group lectures and self-studies about the topics; life and death, freedom, relations and loneliness, and meaning. All registered and enrolled nurses at one rural hospital who were interested in participating in the study were invited. 42 surgical nurses at three wards were randomly assigned to an education or non-education group. All nurses completed questionnaires at equivalent time intervals: at baseline before the intervention, directly after, and 3 and 6 months later. 11 nurses in the education group participated in face-to-face interviews directly after the intervention and after 6 months. Non-parametric tests were used to analyze changes, differences and relations between the education and non-education groups. Interviews were analyzed with qualitative content analysis.

Results: Results concerned significant short-term and long-term changes. Nurses' reported increased confidence and decreased powerlessness in communication as well as increased feelings of value in caring for dying patients 3 and 6 months after the intervention. In addition, they described enhanced awareness on existential issues and increased reflection.

Conclusion: This study indicates that an understanding of the dying patient's situation, derived from enhanced awareness and increased reflection, precedes changes in attitudes towards communication after participating in an educational intervention on existential issues. This small- scale study indicates positive outcomes but the intervention must be tested on a larger scale to be solid and reliable.