

Communicating with patients and families about end of life care

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Key consideration for clinicians communicating with patients & families about end-of-life care:

1. Be proactive about offering patients with life-limiting conditions an early opportunity to discuss their preferences for future health care. Determining their values and goals and if/how they like to share medical decisions is critical
2. Prior to giving new information about prognosis explore the person's current understanding of their illness. Clarify what they want to know and in how much detail. Provide information in small chunks at a gentle pace to facilitate recall of information. Discover from the patient who else information should be shared with.
3. Assess the person's readiness to discuss end of life care, as not all patients will want to discuss this. Continually check their goals and explore both their hopes and fears. Explore what quality of life means for them. The person's preferences, concerns and priorities should be reassessed over time as their condition and situation changes.
4. Discuss all appropriate treatment options broadly and then explain the burden versus benefits for each. Consider offering to make a recommendation on future care based on their values & goals. Involve key family members in the discussion, where appropriate and with the patient's permission, to enhance shared understanding.
5. Be aware and respond to the patient's / carer's emotions throughout discussions about end of life care. Emphasize that support, including symptom control, is available throughout all phases of the illness including the dying process irrespective of treatment choices.
6. Help the patient to formally document their preferences for end of life care, including their preferred substitute decision maker where applicable, and communicate this with their key health providers in a timely manner.

References:

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