

Advice for Physicians Caring for Dying Patients

The following are some tips to help physicians discuss end-of-life issues with their patients. These tips have been developed with respect for the physician-patient relationship and understanding that each situation and patient is unique.

Talk about end-of-life care goals before a medical crisis occurs. Provide information about and tools for advance care planning to your patient and their family caregiver.

If he or she complete a living will or medical power of attorney, discuss your patient's wishes and place copies of the forms in the medical record. Encourage the patient to discuss their end-of-life decisions with their family.

Provide your patients, their families, caregivers, or others involved in the decision-making process with the information they need to make decisions. Provide a clear overview of the diagnosis, prognosis, treatment options, risks, benefits and outcomes.

Try to understand when your patient and their family caregivers ask the same questions more than once as they try to absorb the reality of the patient's situation.

Honor the holistic components of living with a serious illness by involving nurses, social workers and spiritual caregivers as members of the healthcare team.

Remember you are part of a team. Utilize hospice or palliative care team members and be aware of other resources such as chaplains.

Respect the role of the family and especially the primary caregiver as part of the healthcare team.

Family caregivers often assume tremendous responsibility for the physical and emotional care of their loved one. Competent and confident family caregivers can mean the difference between well-managed symptoms and a visit to the emergency room.



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Patients and families report being frequently confused by medical jargon.

Try not to use complex terms or euphemisms. Be gentle and straightforward with language such as, "I believe we are approaching your final weeks, let's discuss where and how you would like to spend this time."

Be familiar with the legal and ethical policies at the facility where your patient is receiving care and the state laws related to end-of-life care. Certain issues such as withdrawal of treatment are sometimes misunderstood.

Hospital, hospice or community ethics committees can serve as a resource in the event you have questions or concerns about a specific situation.

Understand the local resources available to help the patient and family, such as hospice, palliative care, disease-specific organizations, aging services providers and patient/family support groups.

"... if peace and dignity are what we delude ourselves to expect,
most of us will die wondering what we, or our doctors, have done wrong."

SHERWIN NULAND, M.D. *Author of How We Die*



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