Compassionate communication at the end of life: a support guide

Imperial College Healthcare NHS
NHS Trust

1. Prepare

By what name is the patient known?

Make sure you understand their current condition/care and the clinical situation.

Be clear what you need to communicate.

Think about:

- Space: privacy, support, time.
- How: face to face, video or phone.

2. Introduce

Give your full name and role.

Who you are speaking to? Their name and their relationship to the patient.

Are they alone? Do they want someone else there?

If on the phone:

- *I'm sorry we have to speak over the phone, I need to talk about something very important, are you somewhere you can talk?*

3. Explore

What do they know already?

When was the last time they visited or were updated?

- *What do you understand about X's condition?* You may need to probe:
- *Have you been worried (or concerned) about… ?*

Facts are not always remembered but <u>the way</u> they are given will be.

4. Signpost

Explain what you need to talk about.

Give a WARNING SHOT

- *I'm calling as X's condition has changed…*
- *I'm afraid the situation is serious…*

5. Explain

Give a narrative of events, step by step.

Pause after each piece of information.

Be clear and simple and use kind words.

Explain new words and avoid jargon, use the word dying where needed.

Check their understanding throughout.

- *I'm afraid despite appropriate treatment X is not getting better.*
- *We are concerned that X is dying.*
- *If X deteriorates further and their heart were to stop there is nothing we can do to get it started again.*
- *We are concerned that treatment is not helping and could be causing harm.*

6. Acknowledge and allow emotion

Allow silence and reaction.

- *I realise this is very distressing and difficult.*
- *I am so sorry to have to give you this information.*

7. Explore thoughts/feelings

What is important now?

Is visiting feasible? Offer a video call?

Reassure that comfort and dignity are an absolute priority.

Would they like spiritual support?

Who is supporting the carer/relatives?

- *Would it help to call someone else and let them know too?*
- *Do you feel able to inform other family members?*

It is ok not to have all the answers.

Either acknowledge uncertainty, or say you don't know, but will find out for them.

8. Summarise and plan/close

Recap on the situation.

Focus on what's important, what you CAN do.

Ask if they have any further questions.

Clarify the next steps e.g. when to expect an update.

Say goodbye.

9. Afterwards

Take a breath.

Debrief with a colleague, these conversations are hard.

DOCUMENT the conversation using the family communication form on Cerner, (in ad hoc).

For further advice or support contact the Palliative Care team on:

SMH 26011 **HH** 31531 **CXH** 11402