

MEDICAL PHARMACIES PHARMACY CARE NEWS

Information for Residents and their Families

Summer 2015



Palliative Care: Finding Comfort

Learning that you or someone you love is terminally ill is never easy. Emotions can be intense—fear, anxiety, sadness. Decisions will have to be made—about medical care, personal affairs, and final arrangements. And at some point, someone is likely to mention palliative care. This can happen months before the resident nears the end of his/her life.

You may be wondering just exactly what palliative care is. It is not the same as end-of-life care. Palliative care is a resident-centred approach that focuses on providing comfort and improving the quality of life for however long the person has left.

Because each person is unique, palliative care will be different for everyone. It takes into account:

- The resident's feelings, concerns, and desires
- Symptoms such as pain, nausea, constipation, and loss of appetite
- The feelings of the resident's family
- The social and cultural needs of the resident and family

The person with the illness should be encouraged to discuss his/her wishes with family, friends, and the care team. When the end comes, does he/she want to be surrounded by loved ones or to pass in solitude? Who should be allowed to visit and who should be kept away? Some may wish to see a member of the clergy, even if they haven't shown an interest in religion before.

As the Time Draws Near

There are many options available to a person when the end of life is approaching. The options include staying in their own home where they are most comfortable and surrounded by those they love and by community health nurses and personal support workers who can help with meeting needs. Other options are to move into a healthcare facility, such as a hospice or a hospital. If the person is already in a long-term care facility, then staying in familiar surroundings where the healthcare team is well-equipped to meet all needs in end of life is another good choice.

It is also important to listen when the person wants to speak. It may be comforting to make physical contact when the person wants to be touched—perhaps holding a hand or gently stroking an arm. Just be sure it doesn't cause pain, because skin can become very sensitive.

Other things you can do to help include:

- Make sure the temperature and amount of light in the room are at a comfortable level.
- Help the person change position often to help prevent bedsores.
- Offer liquids frequently to prevent dehydration. If the person has difficulty swallowing, offer to moisten his/her lips with a damp cloth.

The goal of palliative care is to ensure the best quality of life for a person who is facing the end of life.

The Palliative Care Team

Long-term care homes have the personnel and resources to provide palliative care and end-of-life care. A palliative care team may include the resident's doctor, nurses, support workers, a pharmacist, a dietitian, a social worker, and therapists. Pharmacists are available to explain about medications, dosages, and possible side effects. As the medication experts on the team, they can advise about potential drug interactions, offer suggestions for changing drugs to prevent interactions, and explain about ways to reduce side effects. Sometimes they can compound special preparations, such as making a suppository for a resident who has difficulty swallowing oral medications.

Quality of Life in the Final Weeks/Days

Among the areas that should be considered to ensure the best possible quality of life include:

- **Physical issues:** People who are facing the end of life need honest answers about what they will experience in the time they have left. They need to understand the nature of their illness in order to come to terms with their situation. However, it is important to be sensitive to how the person reacts to the information so you can judge how frank you should be.
- **Emotional issues:** People who are facing the end of life want to feel that their lives have mattered. As they review the life they led, they want to be reassured that it had meaning and purpose.

- **Family issues:** The importance of family is highlighted at this time. People want to feel loved and appreciated. They also want to have the opportunity to say good-bye to loved ones.
- **Spiritual issues:** Spirituality takes many forms—for some it is a lifelong commitment to a formal religion; for others it is a philosophical outlook. Whatever form it takes, spirituality can provide strength and comfort to many people dealing with a life-limiting illness. This can also be a time of forgiveness and reconciliation before letting go.



Communicating

One of the most important things you can do for someone in this situation is to listen. When talking with the person, be honest and straightforward, but let the person lead the conversation.

Be aware of how close the person wants you to sit, how much talking the person wants to do, and what he/she wants to talk about. Some people like a lot of attention and company; others prefer to be alone to think and reflect. Some people find comfort from the presence of another person, but they don't want to talk or interact. Try to read the signals in the way the person reacts to your presence and actions.

If you have questions about end-of-life medical care, your clinical consultant pharmacist will be happy to answer them.