



Talking About Treatment Options and Palliative Care: A Guide for Clinicians

At the Time of Diagnosis: Beginning to Understand Your Patient's Priorities and Goals

When patients first learn that they have a potentially life-limiting illness their focus is often on curing the disease. However, as an initial plan of care is developed there are opportunities to discuss the benefits of advance care planning and the differences between curative and palliative care. Explaining what palliative care is – care focused on alleviating symptoms – even as you work to cure the illness, allows you to help the patient become familiar and comfortable with this type of care.

When introduced during a conversation about treatment options, the following questions can provide clinicians with information about what is important to the patient. Asking one or two of these questions can lead to future discussion about palliative care and present the patient with an opportunity to explore the topic with you when they are ready.

- As we think about treatment options, what is one thing about you that you think is important to share with me?
- What is your biggest fear when you think about your diagnosis?
- What is your biggest fear about the treatments we have discussed?
- What does quality of life mean to you?
- As your illness progresses, how much do you want to know about your disease and the various treatment options? With whom do you want me to share information, and how much?

When Treatment May Not Be Working: Exploring End-of-Life Options

At some point, it may become apparent that continued treatments are not likely to offer a cure for your patient. One question that is often used to frame a discussion about ending curative treatment protocols is “Would you be surprised if your patient died in the next six to twelve months?” If the answer is no, it may be time to begin the transition away from treatments with curative intent and emphasize palliative care.

The following questions can help you begin or continue the dialogue with your patient.

- Are you comfortable?
- Do you feel that any of your treatments are causing you more harm than good?
- Do you feel like you have good quality of life right now?
- If we could do one thing other than cure your illness to bring you quality of life, what would it be?
- Let's talk again about how much information you want to have about your disease.

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Explaining Treatment Options

Many physicians struggle with explaining treatment options to patients with potentially life-limiting illnesses. The goal is to make sure you listen to the patient and family caregivers and then provide information so that they understand their options and are able to make choices based on their individual needs.

Below are suggested approaches offered in contrast to some more traditional ways of communicating with patients.

Traditional Approaches	New Approaches
XYZ treatment has a 5% success rate.	In my experience this treatment works for very few people. For those people, they may gain a few extra months but many people have told me that the side effects are not worth it.
We can tip the odds in your favor by trying this treatment.	This treatment might give you a slightly better chance of survival than if we didn't do it.
Some patients experience XYZ side effects as a result of the treatment protocol.	You can expect the following side effects in relation to this treatment. I will work with you to manage these side effects as best I can. However, if the side effects become too troublesome, we can talk about other options, including stopping or changing the treatment.
This is what I recommend...	I want to be completely honest with you. Even with treatment, I think it is very unlikely you'll live more than X months.
Do you have any questions?	I've presented a lot of information to you, what questions do you have?
At some point we may have to look at hospice as an option.	With the disease you have, it is very likely that hospice care will be the best option in the future. We can discuss this over time so that you can make decisions that best suit your needs.

Understanding Your Patient's Needs: Responding to Patient/Caregiver Inquiries

Listening to what your patient is saying or not saying is a crucial part of understanding their needs. Questions a patient may ask you are listed below, along with what they might be thinking and truly wanting to know.

When a Patient/Caregiver Asks...	They Might Be Thinking...
What are my chances?	Am I going to die?
What would you do if you were me?	I am overwhelmed. Tell me what to do. I am scared and I trust your expertise.
How long do I have?	I feel like I am dying... Or I am scared about facing death, but I don't have the words to express this... Or How much time do I have left to say my goodbyes?
What are the options?	This isn't working. I want to try something else.