

Discussing the future and prognosis

When

Every patient with a life limiting progressive serious illness should be offered a discussion about prognosis, health care options, and what to expect in the future.

Don't assume that because a patient doesn't ask you, they do not wish to know.

Always seek permission to discuss prognosis with any patient. Would you like to discuss the future and prognosis?

Think about raising issues of prognosis:

- If you would not be surprised if the patient died in 6-12 months.*
- If a colleague and you agree the patient is sick enough to die.*
- If the patient asks you directly.*
- If illness-specific treatments and interventions are not effective.*

Be informed and compassionate

Read the patient's notes and history. Understand that patients with serious illness have usually had many years of using health care services and talking with healthcare professionals.

Try and put yourself in the shoes of the patient, understand their perspective. Anticipate their fears, worries and goals.

Explore what the patient already knows

Tell me about your illness and what is likely to happen... What have the other doctors explained about your illness?

Show the patient you are listening to them (non-verbal body language is important)

So, what you're saying is...

Show interest in them as a person

Who else will be affected by what's happening with your health? How are your family/friends?

Be available for more discussion

Do you have any other worries or concerns?



Understand the patient's concerns and their preference to discuss prognosis

What worries you the most about your illness?

Would you like to discuss your health care options and prognosis?

Would you like to discuss the future?

Is there someone else you would like me to talk to?

Be honest and don't be hesitant in saying "I don't know"

Unfortunately, I can't tell you exactly what will happen to you. I do know that your illness will not improve and will progress. I wish things were different.

*Your illness has progressed to a stage where your function and health will continue to be impacted, I'd say months rather than days, maybe several months. ***Use silence after significant statements and repeat the words a patient uses*** Yes this is the end. Given this information about your health, what is important to you?*

Expect emotion and show empathy

It's hard to hear this.

So, you're really worried about your family.

Yes, it's a shock.

Tell me more....

You have been through so much.

Plan health care support

Given what we have spoken about, here is what we can do now to help...

Adapted from Remap, VitalTalk 2019; Clayton, J., Hancock, M., Butow, P., Tattersall, M., Currow, D., Australian and New Zealand Expert Advisory Group, Hardy, Janet, and Mitchell, G. (2007). Clinical Practice Guidelines for communicating prognosis and end-of-life issues with adults in the advanced stages of a life-limiting illness, and their caregivers. Medical Journal of Australia 186 (12; Suppl.) S77-S83.
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