

Providing compassionate end-of-life care during the COVID-19 crisis: SUPPORTING THE FAMILY

The world is reeling from COVID-19 and restrictive visiting policies may be negatively impacting on the end-of-life care experience for patients and their families. This may lead to heightened feelings of upset and anger, abandonment and isolation, confusion, fear and a sense of being out of control.

This is a difficult situation for everyone to be in. It is important to acknowledge feelings and offer comfort and reassurance. Having clear communication channels to provide information and respond to queries is vital, especially if the family are unable to visit in person. Maybe you can accommodate virtual visiting and optimise the flow of information and communication with families. **We recommend clear information is given to families regarding the reasons for the visiting restrictions and also what alternative arrangements are in place.**

How to support family members

- Provide the family with the name of the person who they can contact to get information about their loved one.
- Suggest the family nominate one spokesperson whom can be the point of contact between the hospital and the family (with the consent of the patient).
- Have a 'communication hour' let family members know at home that at certain times the ward phone lines will be staffed and this is the time they can call to get an update on their loved one.
- Have an open email address for family members to email their messages in. These can then be collated through a central administration person who can bring the messages to the ward to be passed on to the patients.



Show who you are and make the human connection

Try not to let Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) become a social barrier.

- Hello my name is...
- Place a laminated photo of you with your name on the outside of your PPE.

Your presence is your gift

If you're wearing PPE your body language, tone of voice and eye contact has never been more important. Your smile and warmth can be conveyed through your eyes even if you're wearing a face mask.

Communicate Clearly and Honestly

- Use simple clear language.
- Always avoid jargon and euphemisms.
- Try not to avoid difficult questions. See sample phrases to open up a conversation.
- Give the person time, particularly if they are upset or anxious.
- Sometimes a pen and paper or pictures help.

Sample phrases

- ☰ *Is that something you are worried about?*
- ☰ *Would you like to talk about that?*
- ☰ *Would it help if I ... ?*
- ☰ *What can I do to help?*

Acknowledge emotions and feelings

Ask how the person is feeling. Provide information, reassurance, words of kindness. Focus on maintaining hope. Think about what can be done and what can be done well.

- 'I can help your mother to feel more comfortable'*
- 'I will take care of your father'*
- 'I am here for you'*



If visiting is not allowed

- Use the person's mobile phone to keep the connection with family members.
- Encourage Skype and Facetime to support a connection between the person and their family.
- Ask the family if there is anything they would like you to do on their behalf: read a prayer, play a song, say a poem, pass on a message, set up the phone near the person's ear.
- If the person is unconscious talk to the person or read messages from their family. If you can, set up the phone beside the person's ear and enable family members to speak to their loved one.
- Reassure the family that you will be with their loved and will take care of them in their dying.

At the time of death, pausing together for a moment in silence at the bedside is a simple but poignant way to honour the person. This would be particularly symbolic where family members were not permitted to be there. It also helps staff to honour the patient's death.

What to do if the person dies without their family present

The details of the person's death are so important for the family. Be prepared to tell the story, and the role you and other staff members played in it. Providing this information can be of great comfort to the newly bereaved. Have faith in yourself that you can help to make this distressing situation a little easier.

What was it like?

Who was present?

What were their last words?

Did you read to them/pray with them?

Were they comfortable?

Did they open their eyes?

How did you care for them after they died?

How was the death acknowledged? (e.g moment's silence, end-of-life spiral use, etc.)

How long did they stay on the ward for?

What happened next?

At a later date, you might like to send the family a sympathy card.