

HotPick November 2005

Therapeutic Guidelines – Palliative Care Version 2, 2005

I well remember, as a new advanced trainee in palliative medicine, the mixture of relief and anticipation I felt on encountering the first edition of the Therapeutic Guidelines for Palliative Care. Here was an authoritative Australian guide to prescribing which actually met the needs of my patients, which did not need to be extrapolated from overseas practice with medications that were unavailable here, with indications and routes of access which were appropriate for the patients and problems I was seeing, and which I could use to support the management suggestions I was making to GPs and other medical teams. Whilst I did not agree with everything in it, my grubby, much-thumbed volume has met many of these needs over the four years I have owned it, and a new version is now about to be published.

Although I had noticed the general chapters which discuss the approach to providing palliative care, I had never actually read them. This I now realise is a great shame, for in fact the Therapeutic Guidelines provides an excellent mini-textbook of palliative medicine. In reviewing the new edition, I have at last taken the opportunity to read these sections carefully, and also to compare the new with the old. Sections like the "Frequently Asked Questions", which has been structured around the questions of patients, and of GPs and other non-palliative care practitioners, provide sensible and helpful approaches to discussing the "bread and butter" problems of palliative care, and to supporting people through changes they are experiencing as a result of their disease. The discussions of when and how to refer to palliative care, ethical issues, self-care for practitioners, communication, and planning for crises are excellent. New issues that have been identified in this edition reflect changes in medical practice more generally – for instance when and how to turn off implantable cardiac defibrillators, or the potential role of non-invasive ventilation for patients with respiratory failure due to neuromuscular disease. The changes which have been made reflect some seismic shifts which are occurring in palliative care practice, and the changing mix of patients and stage of disease which is now being dealt with by palliative care services. The new chapter, "Life-limiting illnesses other than cancer", is a valuable example of this shift. It is clearer than ever that palliative care is not just about terminal care for cancer patients.

The chapter on pain has been carefully updated, and the opioid conversion table has been reworked. The old table was hard to use. The new one is slightly better but still, unfortunately, hard to use. I also notice that the epidural dose conversion appears to have disappeared from this table in the new edition. However the new material on dose titration and calculation of breakthrough doses is very practical and will improve the safety of prescribing by those who are not using opioids on an everyday basis. Other chapters on symptom management present appropriate, practical approaches to the most common clinical issues, and the continuing theme of distinguishing between reversible and non-reversible problems, and assessing the patient according to their wishes and their disease trajectory, provides a sound palliative care context for decision-making. There are new sections on management of stomal obstruction, diarrhoea and ascites, which are welcome. The addition of a table of electrolyte, mineral and vitamin deficiencies is also a helpful new feature of this edition, given the community preoccupation with nutrition, and the prevalence of nutritional deficiencies in the palliative care population.

The work that has gone into this small book takes it far beyond being a simple formulary. However, I suspect that its main use *is* in fact as a formulary – to check indications and doses, to look up, for instance, the third line treatment for refractory nausea, or as an aide-memoire for treating problems that are less frequently seen by non-palliative care practitioners. Like all the Therapeutic Guidelines books, there are no references to support the recommendations and the reader must hunt for the evidence underlying these guidelines on their own. Nonetheless, it does a very reasonable job, and I am happy to recommend it to all doctors or nurses who will see palliative care patients, as well as to students and trainees. However, in future I will also be making much better use of the general discussion sections, which provide an excellent guide to the palliative care approach. As a textbook of palliative medicine, it is remarkably good value!

Reviewer

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She has a background in public and community health, and in health policy. Her current research interests relate to delirium and psycho-oncology, and she is involved in academic and other educational programs for teaching about palliative care.