

## HotPick September 2005

### When and how to initiate discussion about prognosis and end-of-life issues with terminally ill patients.

*Clayton, J., Butow, P, Tattersall, M.*

J Pain Symptom Management 2005;30 (2):132-144

Communication about end of life issues is recognised as being a difficult and problematic area of professional practice. The majority of studies in this field report on health professionals' experiences and perspectives of communication about end or life issues. This study makes an important contribution to communication research, by examining the views of patients and carers as well as health care professionals about who should initiate prognostic discussions and the context in which such issues can optimally be discussed.

Focus group and individual interviews were conducted with patients, carers and health care professionals recruited from three palliative care services in Sydney. Whilst a variety of views were expressed regarding how communication about end of life issue should be approached, most participants agreed that it was appropriate and important for the doctor or nurse to make discussion of end of life issues an acceptable topic, because this may be difficult for the patient. Moreover, almost all patients and carers agreed that health care professionals needed to be sensitive and responsive to patient's cues when considering the timing of such discussions, and most patients and carers identified the importance of being comfortable with their health professional when discussing prognosis. Participants' responses did, however, illustrate the varying and sometimes disparate preferences and experiences of patients and carers with respect to communication about end of life issues. Patients varied in the amount and type of information they wanted, and whether they would prefer to have a partner or family present.

The authors conclude that it is difficult to be prescriptive about communication about end of life issues. They also acknowledge that the generalisability of their study may be limited, as the patients and carers who participated were mainly people with advanced cancer from urban settings in Sydney. Notwithstanding these limits, some key principles suggested by the findings include ensuring that discussions about end of life issues are accessible to patients and carers, and ensuring that the context in which such discussions are held is sensitive and respectful to individual circumstances and responses. The findings also suggest that the process of communication about end of life issues involves ongoing negotiation between health care professionals and patients about when and how such communication can best occur. This requires health care professionals to have well developed skills in listening, identifying and responding to patient and carer cues.

## Reviewer

### Professor Patsy Yates

Patsy holds the position of Acting Director for Queensland Health's Centre for Palliative Care Research and Education, a statewide service focused on improving the quality of palliative care services in Queensland through research and education. Patsy is also jointly appointed as Professor of Nursing at Queensland University of Technology, where she is subject area coordinator for cancer nursing programs.

Patsy has extensive experience as a clinical nurse and educator in cancer and palliative care. She is currently undertaking studies evaluating psychoeducational interventions for people with cancer experiencing cancer pain, breathlessness, and fatigue.