

Aged care



Palliative care and how evidence supports speech pathologists who care for people at end of life

by Susan Gravier

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Palliative care provides a support system for people living with a life-limiting condition to live as actively as possible for as long as possible. The World Health Organization defines palliative care as an approach to care that supports the physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs of a person with a life-limiting illness and supports the family and carers.¹

Palliative care is not always a specialised role for **speech pathologists**.^{2,3} Emerging evidence highlights the important role that speech pathologists have in palliative care across many settings.^{4,5} Dysphagia and communication changes are common in life-limiting illnesses.^{6,7} By helping clients identify goals and priorities, speech pathologists can nurture in their clients a sense of ability, **dignity**⁸ and control, and enhance **quality of life**.^{9,10}

Life-limiting conditions¹¹ can affect people of any age. Cancer is a commonly recognised life-limiting condition, and others include dementia, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes, chronic liver disease, end-stage renal disease and neurodegenerative diseases (e.g., Motor Neurone Disease (MND), MS, Parkinson's, Muscular Dystrophy, Huntington's Disease).¹²

People with a life-limiting condition can benefit from palliative care as their capacity for normal functioning may deteriorate rapidly and severely impact their quality of life and that of their family and carers.

The time course or trajectory of life-limiting conditions are variable. Palliative care may be required throughout the course of a condition or towards the end of life, and involvement of allied health professionals will vary according to individual needs.

The National Palliative Care Strategy 2018¹³ highlights the importance of person-centredness and evidence as essential ingredients of quality palliative care. A guiding principle of the strategy is that people receiving and providing palliative care have access to trustworthy resources to help them make informed decisions about care.

Research and **education**¹⁴ can provide evidence to inform those decisions. Speech pathologists draw on the best available research evidence along with clinical expertise, the patient's values and circumstances, and the clinical context. Pulling these elements together through clinical reasoning.

To support speech pathologists working in any setting looking after a person with palliative care needs, the **Allied Health section**¹⁵ of CareSearch offers information, tools and resources. A new page "**Getting Started**"¹⁶ links to selected pages to help allied health professionals understand important aspects of palliative care and build confidence in using evidence to inform and improve practice.

Current best evidence is the foundation of effective, efficient and safe care^{17, 18} yet finding the best evidence can be time consuming. CareSearch and palliAGED address this by enabling rapid access to palliative care evidence and evidence summaries. CareSearch and palliAGED inform the user whether the evidence is solid, trustworthy and clinically important and highlight areas of controversy and research gaps.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) helps speech pathologist to maintain and improve knowledge, skills, and personal and professional qualities. The CareSearch Education section hosts **eLearning**¹⁹ activities that can help build or extend skills, knowledge and confidence. These resources are for independent learning rather than prescribed or formal learning.

Recognising the important role that speech pathologists play in educating clients, their family and carers,²⁰ the sites also host information and resources such as the **My Information Kit**²¹ and **Order Resources**²².

As sections are built or refreshed, discipline experts, palliative care and evidence experts review the content to ensure that it resonates with clinical practice in the Australian context. In this way, speech pathologists are supported in delivering evidence-based care for clients approaching the end of their life.

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Susan trained as a physiotherapist in Adelaide and worked in regional Victoria, Canada and Hong Kong. She is now a researcher in palliative care, having worked on healthy ageing and active ageing projects for many years. In 2016-2017, Susan

coordinated the production of palliAGED, writing many of the topic pages in the Evidence and Practice Centres. CareSearch and palliAGED are Commonwealth Government-funded online resources that pull together and consolidate evidence-based information and resources into accessible language and formats. CareSearch provides evidence-based palliative care information across the lifespan and across the health system, palliAGED provides that information for the aged care sector. Susan is currently leading the allied health component of the **CareSearch and palliAGED Engagement Project**.²³



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