

Apr 7, 2020

Optimizing the Goals of Care Conversation

Dear Colleagues,

Initiating a conversation with a patient about their advanced care planning is not an easy task. This subject can induce a state of emotional arousal in both the practitioner and the patient. Physicians need to reflect, center themselves and take a moment to account for their own state of being before initiating the conversation. We must understand each particular patient's values and goals and this is best accomplished by always starting with "asking" before "telling" in our mode of conversation. Ask patients about their understanding of their illness. If their perceived knowledge is incorrect, ask permission to clarify with your opinion as a medical professional.

It is important to ask permission to have the conversation about DNR/CPR. Avoid vague and technical terms and vocabulary. Questions such as "Would you want us to do everything?" is not appropriate or helpful and leads to patient confusion. This question may also imply less than optimal care would be given if their answer was no. We must assure patients we are not abandoning them if they choose to sign the DNR form. The Medical Orders for Scope of Treatment (MOST) form is a valuable tool and comforts many of our patients' fears when we review it with them. They feel they will still be provided with significant medical support, and they have a choice and some control over their level of wanted care. Advise them we are making decisions based on best medical practice and their own beliefs and wishes.

As physicians, we need to explain to patients that CPR is not always the standard of care. CPR may not be wanted by the patient if there is deemed to be no medical benefit. We need to remind patients that experience has shown that CPR does not often restore a patient to a viable quality of life. If CPR is only partly successful, many patients could remain dependent on machines for ongoing survival or brain damage is also a possible outcome. Remind patients we want to protect them from unwanted or harmful procedures.

It might be more comfortable for physicians to discuss this subject by explaining that due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, you have decided to open this conversation so that your patient's wishes and values are noted in advance in the event that this crisis escalates and decisions have to be made quickly. You can also mention that the request to discuss this matter was initiated by the emergency physicians at Lions Gate Hospital and also from the North Shore Division of Family Practice. Other tips on how to navigate the conversation are provided in this communication package.