

Hospice Care Linked to Better Patient Satisfaction and Higher Quality of Care at the End of Life

Ever since hospice care became available in the United States in the 1970s, doctors, nurses, and other medical experts have collected data to help shed light on the many ways hospice care can help patients who are facing a life-limiting illness. One of the latest studies about hospice, published in the medical journal *BMJ Supportive & Palliative Care*, shows that hospice care during the last six months of life is associated with better patient satisfaction and higher quality care. The authors of the study found several areas in which quality of care was improved, including:

- Better pain control
- Fewer trips to the hospital
- Lower chance of dying in a hospital
- Lower chance of dying in the intensive care unit (ICU)

The authors reviewed surveys of Medicare patients at top-rated medical centers across the country. Among more than 163,000 patients included in the study, just under half were enrolled in hospice during the last six months of life. Of all the patients, 31% died in the hospital and 22% died in an ICU.

The study found many benefits that were linked to hospice enrollment. For instance, hospice use was associated with less intense healthcare measures for terminally ill patients. Surveys

Medical experts call for a “greater expansion of hospice use to reduce deaths in the hospital setting and improve the quality of care for chronically ill patients.”

and studies conducted over the last several decades show that most terminally ill patients want less aggressive care and more comfort care at end of life. Hospice use was also associated with fewer deaths in a hospital or an ICU when compared to patients who did not have access to hospice services.

In addition, the authors found that patients who had access to hospice care reported a higher satisfaction rating to the healthcare they received overall. These patients were more likely to report that medications were explained to them before being given. Patients with access to hospice care also reported better management of pain. Because of the many benefits associated with hospice care, the authors stress the importance of expanding hospice use even further “to reduce deaths in the hospital setting and improve the quality of care for chronically ill patients.”

The authors conclude that family- and patient-centered end-of-life care, such as hospice care, are important for higher quality healthcare overall. They add, “Promoting high-value, safe, and effective care” is a must for healthcare systems worldwide.



How to Talk to Your Doctor about End-of-Life Care

Resources Available at CompassionAndChoices.org

End-of-life care is an important but sometimes challenging subject to talk about with your doctor. The non-profit organization Compassion & Choices has developed written tips and provides several free resources to make this conversation easier for you.

The organization recommends that people with a terminal illness make their priorities known to their medical providers, especially their doctors, and ask about all the available options. They advise, “Remember that you and your doctors are partners in your healthcare, and your doctor needs to know what is important to you.”

On its website, Compassion & Choices emphasizes that you are the only one who can decide what you want when it comes to your own healthcare. It is recommended that you talk directly with your doctor — not another hospital staff member or an assistant — about your values and what is most important to you when it comes to end-of-life care.

The authors of the website provide a “Questions to Ask Your Doctor Checklist.” The hope is that people with a terminal illness will use it as a guide to help start a conversation with their doctor. The questions include:

- *What can I expect from this illness?*
- *What is my life expectancy?*
- *What big changes in my health should I be prepared for?*
- *What end-of-life care do you recommend?*
- *Will you refer me to hospice as soon as I am eligible?*
- *When I near the end of life, will I be able to spend my last days at home?*
- *Will you or one of your staff help me create an advance directive or will you write a physician order for life-sustaining treatment (POLST) for me?*

The website lists practical tips to help keep open and clear communication with your doctor when you discuss your end-of-life preferences, including:

- When you don’t understand what your doctor is telling you, ask them to explain it a different way.
- If your preferences about end-of-life care change in any way, make sure to tell your doctor. It’s normal for your priorities to change as time passes.
- You don’t have to cover every topic in one visit. The conversation can span many meetings.

“Make sure you and your doctor fully understand each other,” the website authors recommend, adding that you shouldn’t hesitate to ask more questions if you’re not completely sure what your doctor means. If your doctor can’t take the time to talk about your preferences

during one appointment, feel free to make another appointment just for that purpose. That way the doctor and staff will know to set aside enough time for a more in-depth talk with you.

Compassion & Choices emphasizes that talking about end-of-life care with your doctor is not only for people who are terminally ill. You should feel free to talk to your doctor anytime about your preferences. The website authors say, “The time to plan for end-of-life care is before you need it. You can begin this conversation with your doctor now so that in the event you are diagnosed with a terminal illness, you and your doctor will have a foundation for moving forward with honoring your choices.”

For the full checklist and access to other resources, visit the website at CompassionAndChoices.org.



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