

Unexpected Loss During the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Role of the Palliative Care Team



Josh Wiener, MD MBS, Karen Kate Huddelson, BCCC BCPC, Kathy Jo Gutgsell, MT-BC, Mona Gupta, MD AGSF

University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center - Case Western Reserve University
Contact: Joshua.wiener2@uhhospitals.org

Background

- Hospitals have imposed limitations on the number of visitors a patient can receive in hospital in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with many permitting only a single visitor. Additionally, concerns about properly managing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) makes it difficult to marshal the entire Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) in support of patients and their families.
- All members of the IDT, from physicians, nurses, spiritual counsel, music therapy, and other therapy and support staff play an integral role in providing comfort at a difficult time
- This is especially important when family members are left to grieve from the sudden loss of a loved one in the hospital

Objective

Describe a new hybrid in-person/telehealth model established at our institution for the delivery of IDT support to patients and their loved ones, which was developed in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Methods

- Palliative Chaplain initiates in-person visit to patients, with digital presence of Music Therapist.
- Equipment – iPad + FaceTime application
- Zoom or FaceTime applications additionally used to include family members outside of the hospital
- Full PPE used for Covid-19 patients – standard hospital donning/doffing protocol used
- Limited PPE used for non-Covid-19 patients in accordance with hospital protocol

Example Case

- 73-year-old woman with acute-decompensated liver failure secondary to NASH cirrhosis.
- Recent 9-week stay at outside hospital for fluid overload
- A goals of care discussion was held - the patient was amenable to initiating home hospice and comfort care with the stated goals of pain management and maximizing time with family.
- Her husband initially disagreed, however, after discussion, he and his wife felt mutually accepting and comfortable with initiating hospice care.
- A hybrid in-person/telehealth Pastoral Care and Music Therapy visit was conferred.
- Patient was found unresponsive and pronounced deceased the next morning.
- The widower later sent a Thank You note with accompanying Mass Card.
- He was grateful for having a lasting happy memory of that shared IDT visit, stating, "did you see the look on her face? Did you see how happy she was?"*

Results

- 300+ hybrid In-Person/Telehealth IDT visits conferred
- Quotes from additional Patients and their Families:
"The smile that you... brought to M was a blessing... I have told many people about that moment...The word to our wedding song "Always" is on her Funeral Mass card and is what she wanted. She is smiling!"*

"Thank you for being there for our E. She was loved by so many folks here at UH."*

"I love it when you two visit me."

"Rev. Karen & Kathy Jo – You were both so comforting to me and my family. May God bless you as you bless others."

"I appreciate the spiritual care and music provided to my husband, D.L. It is good to know that you provided this in his last hours. Thank you. It is a blessing for me to know you were there."*

*Patients' initials have been changed

Conclusion

- We have established an in-person/telehealth hybrid model for the delivery of Palliative Care services
- This has enabled us to continue to support patients and their families at a time when hospital systems have imposed new restrictions on the number of individuals that can be present in a patient room, in order to limit the spread of Covid-19 while conscientiously conserving PPE

