

Side by side, till the end

A few months ago, medical student Jonas Ho spent his attachment with the National University Hospital palliative care team. It was an eye-opening experience for the young doctor-to-be.

A couple of months ago, I spent five days with the palliative care team at the National University Hospital, I learned many lessons that I will cherish as I continue to learn to be a useful doctor.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

I see now that practising palliative care is about viewing each patient in a holistic manner, appreciating their beliefs, values, and understanding that each one of them has a story that we only know a little of. The medical aspect of ensuring the patient's comfort is only a fraction of his care. The patient and his family's concerns, worries and preferences must all be considered thoroughly and addressed well.

During my attachment, I also found out how important it was for the Palliative Care (Pal Care) team to acknowledge the family's burden and let them know that the team was there to support them. This awareness gives comfort to the family members.

BE SENSITIVE

In facilitating Advanced Care Planning (ACP), which can be a very delicate process, the team has to be as sensitive as possible. During ACP sessions, the patient, family and Pal Care team discuss the patient's wishes regarding life-sustaining treatments, where he would like to spend his final hours, and to whom he will entrust the responsibility of decision-making on his behalf when he loses the ability to.

Though difficult, this is an important conversation, and the Pal Care team has to ensure the



Jonas Ho:
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best is done for the patients so that they can live out their final days on their own terms. Being there for the families during such trying times becomes an incredibly meaningful and important task.

The team also needs to ensure that all the patient's worries and questions are fully addressed in a terminal discharge. In one session, I saw how Dr L, Sister P and Dr Y spoke at length with a man who wanted to bring his wife home from the hospital. The level of patience and amount of guidance required of the team to address all his questions was a striking lesson for me. Having the team explain the different precautions he could take and how he could prepare their home for his wife was definitely comforting for him.

Preserving the patient's dignity, and relieving pain or discomfort is a critical aspect of the Pal Care team's responsibilities. During a terminal extubation for a patient in ICU, I witnessed how gently the

team approached the entire removal process, having warned the family that the process could be a traumatic experience for them. When the patient grimaced a little during the extubation, Dr Z stopped everything to ensure that another bolus of analgesics was given to minimise the patient's pain and discomfort. This episode taught me what it meant to help a patient pass on with dignity.

SIDE BY SIDE

Sometimes all that is needed is a gentle touch on the shoulder, giving time to the patient, allowing a family member to be emotional, or the offering tissue paper or a drink. These actions go a long way in helping patients and their families feel supported.

The clearest lesson I learned from my attachment was this: Caring for patients is much more than just a job. Instead, it is a walk alongside each patient who is on his or her final journey — that is the genuine mission of the Pal Care team. 🙏