

COVID-19 Medical Staff Support Response Team – Difficult Conversations

At multiple points during their career, physicians will need to impart difficult information to their patients/families. Sharing this type of news can be a challenging part in a clinician's work.

These are unprecedented and demanding times. And given the current uncertain and ever shifting climate, this task is potentially even more complex. During this pandemic, there is no roadmap and physicians may be required to have difficult care conversations they never expected

- Triageing When you're deciding where a patient should go
- Admitting When your patient needs the hospital, or the ICU
- Deciding When things aren't going well, goals of care, code status
- Resourcing When limitations force you to choose, and even ration

What we know:

- Emotionally charged communications will be most effective if they are managed in a consistent and compassionate way without creating confusion or additional suffering for patients and their families.
- The more emotionally laden the message, the more the possibility for misunderstanding.
- You can never ask too many clarifying questions. Don't try to have a difficult conversation without actually understanding what the other perspective is.
- People who receive bad news usually remember the physician's attitude and manner more vividly than the technical details.
- Individuals crave a human approach from their healthcare provider.
- What is communicated and how it is communicated are equally important.
- Where possible give advance warning and lay the groundwork for a difficult conversation.
- Clear communication that follows a consistent framework and is delivered with empathy will reduce the possibility of misunderstanding and further suffering.
- The role of the physician is to provide truthful, caring, and helpful information while at the same time remaining calm, clear, and decisive.
- Empathy is a skill that can be developed and is different from sympathy.
- Empathy is a crucial part of emotional intelligence that leaders need to employ in times of crisis.
- Notice any feelings of frustration, anger or helplessness so you can manage them and not bring them into the conversation.
- Almost counterintuitively, the professional's own humanity and self-awareness is what cultivates the resilience needed to care profoundly without becoming overwhelmed.
- Physicians can benefit from a framework and practical advice on how talk about some difficult topics.

A telephone support line and dedicated email for physicians in acute or community care is now available 7 days a week from 8:00-20:00. VCH/PHC psychologists are available to help you to navigate a challenging conversation that may occur as a result of COVID related care decisions and to problem solve realistic approaches.

Phone: 604-875-4987

Email: MDMRPsupport@vch.ca

In order to sustain this work your self-care is essential so you are encouraged also to reach out proactively when you need support or guidance around having difficult conversations that may occur as a result of COVID related care decisions. VCH, our patients and residents need you, your skill, your expertise and your compassion. Please let us know how else we can support you.

Questions? Comments? Need Support?

Please contact:

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