Create a LIFEMAP for Goals of Care Discussions during a Pandemic
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After searching through the nursing home records, you’ve finally found a family member’s phone number. Your patient is a 91-year-old woman with a history of dementia, hypertension, and kidney disease. She just arrived from a nursing home where residents have tested positive for COVID-19. Her temperature is 39°C; she’s hypoxic and tachycardic. After you dial her daughter’s number and wait for an answer, you realize you don’t know what to say. Is there a tactful way to ask about code status? Should you tell the daughter that her mother may be critically ill or dying? Will you have the time to understand the patient and family’s wishes before your next critical patient arrives?

As emergency medicine physicians we are trained to be proceduralists. Procedures have steps. In a lumbar puncture, first we position, then we sterilize, and finally we insert the needle. Goals of care conversations are no different. To reinforce consistency and efficiency, goals of care conversations should be discussed in a stepwise manner. The following is an approach to COVID-19 goals of care conversations for emergency medicine physicians adapted from VitalTalk.

Always remember to document the conversation in the patient’s chart so their wishes are carried out by other providers. As with any procedure, goals of care discussions are billable when well documented. Mention who was involved in the decision making, how long the discussion lasted, and what was decided. Fill out any POLST or power of attorney forms if necessary.

These conversations are very challenging and it can be helpful to know what to say. Don’t be afraid to refer back to these phrases to spark a more meaningful discussion. Unlike many procedures, goals of care discussions can be especially hard on the physicians initiating them. Your patients and their families will be thankful you spent the time to understand their wishes.

Curious about ways to access this information quickly on a busy shift? Try downloading VitalTalk’s iPhone or Android app “VitalTips.” On the app, you can find COVID specific guides on how to talk about various COVID related topics from grieving to resource allocation. Learn more at: www.vitaltalk.org.