

Create a LIFEMAP for Goals of Care Discussions during a Pandemic

Austin J. Causey, MD



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.



L Lead the Conversation

Take initiative and start the difficult conversation. Oftentimes, people are eager to talk. "How are you feeling about this? Would it be okay if we talk about what happens if your mom gets worse?"

I Invite Perspective

Most likely, patients and families have thought about COVID-19 before arriving in the emergency department. Inquire about their thoughts: "Have you or your family thought about what might happen if you are infected with COVID-19?"

F Focus on Accurate Understanding

It's important that patients' and their families have an accurate picture of the clinical situation. Be open with them and always ask permission first. "Would it be okay if I add my perspective on what COVID-19 might mean for you?" Be clear: "Unfortunately, many patients with your illnesses who are infected with COVID-19 are unlikely to survive if they are put on a ventilator."

E Expect Emotion and Demonstrate Empathy

Offer understanding "I can't imagine how difficult this news is to hear." And try naming their emotions "Anyone in your shoes would feel overwhelmed and scared."

M Map Important Values

You're trying to understand your patient's wishes so that you can make a recommendation that will stick. Ask about hopes and worries. "Given what COVID could mean for you, what are you worried about? Is there anything you're hoping for right now?" "If we think this disease could be fatal, can you let us know what's most important for you/your family member?"

A Align Yourself Explicitly

Before you suggest next steps, make sure your patient or their family knows that you've heard them. "I want to make sure I am understanding you correctly, this is what I have heard so far." "It sounds like your mother wanted to die as peacefully as possible, is that right?"

P Plan and Personally Reflect

Ask permission and make a recommendation; patients and families are looking for guidance. "Given what we talked about, I recommend we move forward like this..." "What we will do... what we won't do..."

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. ●