

Having difficult conversations at the end of life: staff, residents & families

Jo Hockley RGN PhD MSc SCM
Nurse Consultant, St Christopher's Hospice,
London SE26 6DZ
Honorary Fellow, University of Edinburgh
j.hockley@stchristophers.org.uk

- As care home staff how do we learn how to have these conversations?
- Core attributes we need in order to engage
- Pointers in how to talk to relatives

How do we learn to undertake difficult conversations?

- Skills need to be developed
 - Seeing other people undertake difficult conversations
 - Learning some 'top tips' through communication courses
 - ...throwing the question back....
 - Not being afraid to 'have a go'
 - Barts - 1985

USING THE WORD 'dying'

- CAI We were told that she was deteriorating, but we weren't told she was actually 'dying'. So I mean... that was a shock to me because I've just been off for two days, I have just come back to-day.
- JH So it is something about using this word 'dying' that is quite important?
- CAI It is for me!
- CAii ...for everyone to use the word 'dying'
- SN I thought she was just declining.
- CAI Even when you think someone is deteriorating, you think they are just going to bounce back
- CAii For me 'deteriorating' & 'dying' are two different things

"Dying with dignity is....dying in the presence of people who know how to drop the professional role mask and relate to others simply and richly as a human being"

[David Roy, *Ethics & Aging*. 1988]

... 'I am really tired and its time you go. Go to the light, they're all waiting on you. Because you've been telling me you're seeing them.' – You know, he was seeing my mother [who died 7 yrs ago]. And he was, he's saying "Oh, she's at the door!" And I says, "why are you hanging on?!" ...'

[NHG.rel2. GSFCH Phase 4]

Core attributes for a helpful relationship

(Carl Rogers 1902-1987)

A person is more likely to respond positively if they experience the professional as:

- Respectful (unconditional positive regard)
- Empathic
- Genuine & trustworthy

Talking to relatives

(Buckman 1998)

- Get the physical context right
- Find out how much the relative already understands/knows
 - 'how do you feel your Mum is to-day?'
- Active listening & empathetic responses
- Share information
- Follow up

"And then the last day, I mostly just wanted to be with my mum. I just wanted to be there. There wasn't a great need to know everything, it was only afterwards I thought, I wish I'd known that about that breathing. I wish I had known all about that".

[Rel.3; NHA]

..... "They called the undertaker and he came and they got my dad in the coffin. Then Denise said, 'would you like to come along?' and I went along and followed her and the undertaker down the corridor walking behind the coffin. And all the doors of the residents were open. And the ones that could were sitting nearer their door, they'd wheeled themselves to the door....."

And when I got to the reception, all the night staff that were coming on were standing there and all the day staff from up the stairs and down the stairs were [there] ... they were all standing round and ... that was absolutely lovely.

And Denise said, 'Oh, I never asked them to do that.' She says, 'I did go into all the residents telling them that [your Dad] had passed away...& that they are going to be taking him away.. Do you want us to close the door? and everyone said 'no'. That was nice – that was really nice" [NHG.Rel2: GSFCH 2008]

...Death in the very old and frail is a natural process and not a medical procedure – we need to be prepared to relate as human beings...