

CONTACTING RELATIVES BY PHONE TO COMMUNICATE DEATH OF A PATIENT

STEP 1: PREPARE YOURSELF

- Take a moment to compose yourself. A few slow deep breaths will help you focus.
- Check patient's information: patient name? Did they have children/a partner? If you can, relatives have found it helpful to know the name of who was with their loved one towards the end of their life.
- Check latest protocol following death of a patient and what bereavement support is available.
- Consider rehearsing/role playing what you are going to say with a colleague.
- Find a space where you won't be interrupted. Pass your bleep/phone to a colleague. If possible, use a landline to make the call.

STEP 2: STARTING OFF

- Introduce yourself by name.
 - Clearly explain which team and hospital you are calling from.
 - Establish who you are speaking to and their relationship to the patient. Check they can talk privately.
 - Speak slowly with pauses between sentences. Counting to 3 in your head can help slow you down, particularly if you're feeling nervous.
 - If the person is very distressed, they may ask straight away if their relative has died - still use the 'warning shots'.
 - If the person does not answer the phone - DO NOT leave a voicemail.
- "Hello, my name is xx. I am part of the xx team who has been looking after [Name]."
 - "Is there somewhere quiet that you can talk at the moment?"
 - "Can I just check who is at home with you now?"
 - "Shall I call you back in 5 minutes when you've had a chance to put the TV on or find a toy/game for the children?"

STEP 3: WARNING SHOTS

- Briefly set context for telephone call.
 - Ask if there is anyone else (e.g. partner) they want to be in on the call too.
 - Remember to speak slowly, clearly and with pauses.
- "I'm calling to talk about [Name]."
 - "What have you been told so far about their condition?"
 - "I am sorry to have to tell you this over the phone and not in person." PAUSE

STEP 4: GIVING KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

- Talk VERY slowly, honestly, and realistically.
 - Avoid euphemisms (do not say passed away) and technical jargon.
 - After you have told the person that the patient has died, STOP for a few seconds to allow the person to take in what you have said.
 - Listen for reactions to gauge when they are ready for more information.
 - Remember pauses are important as you can't see the other person's reaction to what you are saying.
- "I'm very sorry to tell you that [Name] became very unwell and has died. I'm so sorry."
 - "I am very sorry to give you this news over the phone"
 - "Do I need to slow down? Would you like me to repeat anything?"
 - "I understand this might be very difficult to take in..... just take a few moments."

STEP 5: RESPONDING TO THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF THE NEWS

- Support person with their own feelings/distress about the bereavement.
 - Distress may limit their capacity to absorb information.
 - Silences can feel uncomfortable and longer than they actually are on the telephone. It is difficult to know how a person is reacting when you can't see them; there may be other people in earshot including children.
 - Don't feel you have to fill the silences.
 - Using sounds and words, e.g. 'uh-huh', 'mmm', "take your time - I'm still here" replaces eye contact or touch, and confirms your presence.
- If person is crying or shouting: "I understand that it is very upsetting news, particularly by telephone."
 - If person repeatedly says "it's not true, it can't be": "I understand this is very difficult for you to take in."
 - If person goes very quiet or says 'thank you for letting me know': "This news can be very difficult to take in; would you like me to help you think about what you need to do next?"

STEP 6: ESTABLISH IF THE PATIENT HAD ANY IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

- Check if the patient was important to any children, names and approximate ages.
 - If children are under 25 years old, go to Step 6A.
 - If children are over 25 years old, or no children identified, go to Step 7.
- "Does [Name] have any children who will need to be told?"
 - "Are they with you at home right now?"

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STEP 6A: HOW TO TALK TO THE CHILDREN

- Telling children about a loved one's death is emotionally challenging. People don't want to cause distress, but children need to know.
 - Discuss children's awareness of what has been going on. Remind them that even very young children will have noticed changes in their environment and will be looking for explanation.
 - If person expresses fear about how to tell the children, consult our [Step by Step Guide for Families: How to tell Children that Someone has Died](#) which includes suggestions on answering children's common questions.
 - Reassure it will not cause harm to tell children how adults are feeling, but careful not to over share extreme emotions.
 - If parents are separated, confirm who will tell the children and encourage consistent messaging by adults to avoid confusion.
 - In lockdown situations there will be very little privacy and time for people to prepare themselves or get support from a friend or relative.
- "Thinking about talking to [children's names] about this probably feels the hardest thing in the world. It's completely understandable that you want to protect them from this news."
 - "I understand you are worried that telling the children will be upsetting for them. Even very young children need an explanation for what's going on"
 - "I know in the current situation there is not much time or space for you to think about how you will tell the children. Would it be helpful for us to talk through how you might do that?"
 - "It's very natural for children to feel very upset and sometimes they may even feel angry. But talking is very important in helping them through this difficult time."
 - "It's OK to talk with children about how upsetting and sad this news is for everybody."

STEP 6B: HELPING TO PREPARE FOR CHILDREN'S COMMON QUESTIONS

- Prepare people for common questions that children may ask.
 - People need to consider the child's age and level of understanding.
 - Encourage person to check what the children know and understand already; ask children if they would like more information or have questions about what has happened.
 - Read our 'How to tell children' document which includes how to answer children's common questions for different age groups.
- "Children often want to know what caused the death and are worried that it might have been their fault." Emphasise that the patient had Coronavirus, were cared for by the medical team and that it was nobody's fault.
 - "Children may ask you if you are going to die, who will look after them and whether they will catch it. Shall we plan how you might deal with these questions at home?"
 - Focus on practical information and steps everyone is taking to stop the spread of the Coronavirus (washing hands, distancing...) Remind children other people in the family and their friends love and care for them.

STEP 7: MAKE A PLAN

- Finish by explaining what will happen next, using most up to date hospital policy regarding death certification, mortuary etc.
 - Reassure them they will not have to manage this alone; direct to established bereavement services and online resources.
 - Repeat your name and which department you are calling from.
 - Update patient file and tell other staff that the next of kin have been told.
 - These are emotionally exhausting conversations. Take a minute to check how you are feeling. Do you need to take 5-mins/a cup of tea/snack/ talk to your team?
- "I know this has been a very difficult conversation. There has been a lot to take in; is there anything you do not understand?"
 - "Just to recap, the next steps will be [refer to latest hospital protocol re bereavement services for Coronavirus related deaths]."

TOP TIPS

1. Find a quiet place. Make sure you have the key information. Use a landline if possible.
2. Speak slowly, clearly, with pauses.
3. Counting to 3 in your head can help slow you down, particularly if you're feeling nervous.
4. Silences can feel uncomfortable and longer than they actually are on the telephone. Don't feel you have to fill the silence.
5. Remember that the patient may be important to children; it is essential to help adults think about how to tell children as soon as possible.
6. These are difficult conversations; take time to look after yourself, it may be helpful to 'off load' to a colleague or reflect with your team.