

Contacting Relatives by Phone to Communicate Death of a Patient

International version



STEP 1: PREPARE

- Take a moment to compose yourself. A few slow deep breaths will help you focus.
- Check patient's information: Patient name? Language spoken (Is interpreter needed/available? If not prepare translation of key phrases)? Spiritual background and beliefs of their community about illness and death? 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. Before making the call find a quiet space to minimise interruptions.
- Consider rehearsing/role playing what you are going to say with a colleague.

STEP 2: STARTING THE CONVERSATION

- Introduce yourself by name.
- Clearly explain your job role, department and hospital you are calling from.
- Establish you are speaking to the correct person within the family.
- Check they are able to take the call.
- 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 continue to step 3.
- 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]"
- "Can I check that I am speaking to xx who is the [Relative] of [Name]?"
- "Is there somewhere you can talk at the moment?"
- "Shall I call you back in 5 minutes when you are ready to take the call?"

STEP 3: PREPARING THE RELATIVE FOR THE NEWS

- Briefly set context for telephone call.
- Ask if there is another person in the family/community that should be on the call too (e.g. decision maker).
- Remember to speak slowly, clearly and with pauses.

- "I'm calling to talk about [Name]."
- "What do you know 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 technical/medical language.
- 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 explain 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 the only thing they say is '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 WAS A PARENT/GRANDPARENT/CAREGIVER

- Check if the patient was a parent/grandparent/caregiver ; names and approximate ages of children.
- If children identified are under 18 years old, go to Page 2.

- "Does [Name] have any children who will need to be told?"
- "Are they with you at home right now?"

STEP 7: HELPING RELATIVE MAKE A PLAN

- Finish by explaining what will happen next using most up to date hospital policy regarding patients who have died and what relatives need to do next.
- Check if there are any religious/cultural/burial rites or rituals needed.
- Help relative identify sources of practical, religious or spiritual support.
- Repeat your name, your role and which hospital you are calling from.
- Inform person in charge that relatives have been told. Ensure records updated.
- These conversations are difficult and emotional. Take 5 minutes to check how you are feeling before you start your next task.

- "I understand this has been a very difficult conversation. There has been a lot to take in; is there anything you want me to explain again?"
- "Just to recap, the next steps will be [refer to latest hospital protocol for Coronavirus related deaths]"

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STEP 6A: IF CHILDREN AFFECTED BY PATIENT DEATH ARE UNDER 18 YEARS DISCUSS HOW TO TALK TO THE CHILDREN

- Telling children about a 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.
- Confirm who will tell each child and encourage consistent messaging by adults to avoid confusion.
- If person expresses fear about how to tell the children, consult [How to tell children](#) document 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.

- *"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"*
- *"Would it be helpful for us to talk through how you might tell the children?"*
- *"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 AFTER SOMEONE HAS DIED

- Prepare people for common questions that children may ask.
- Consider the child's age and level of understanding.
- Emphasise that being honest to children will stop them wrongly thinking the death was caused by witchcraft or something they did (not) say or do.
- 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.
- ['How to tell children'](#) document covers these steps in more detail. Ask permission to email this document, or photograph the pages and send as a text to the family straight away.

- *"Children often want to know what caused the death and are worried that it might have been their fault."*

Emphasise that parent was 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 Coronavirus. Shall we talk about how you might deal with these questions?"*

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: HELPING RELATIVES MAKE A PLAN

- Finish by explaining what will happen next using most up to date hospital policy regarding patients who have died and what relatives need to do next.
- Check if there are any religious/cultural/burial rites or rituals needed.
- Help relative identify sources of practical, religious or spiritual support.
- Repeat your name, your role and which hospital you are calling from.
- Inform person in charge that relatives have been told. Ensure records are updated.
- These conversations are difficult and emotional. Take 5 minutes to check how you are feeling before you start your next task.

- *"I know this has been a very difficult conversation. There has been a lot to take in; is there anything you want me to explain again?"*
- *"Just to recap, the next steps will be [refer to latest hospital protocol for Coronavirus related deaths]"*

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

1. Find a quiet place. Make sure you have the key information.
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 a parent/grandparent/caregiver; 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.