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### ***Providing Relief With Palliative Care***

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*At Sturdy Memorial*

Medicine has made great strides in curing many acute illnesses as well as in treating, over the long term, many chronic illnesses. As a result, patients are living longer and learning to manage their chronic disease processes for years, and are doing quite well. However, chronic illnesses, despite the highest quality of care, do progress over time, and there comes a point at which patients choose to no longer have aggressive medical treatments, a point at which they choose palliative care.

Palliative care provides chronic or terminally ill patients with relief from the pain, symptoms, and stress of their conditions. This type of specialized medical care helps patients take control of their illness and feel supported throughout the stages of their disease, while enhancing quality of life for patients and their families and caregivers. End-of-life planning ensures patients, families, and doctors understand and work to support and implement a patient's wishes.

#### **Talk with your doctor**

Palliative care is an appropriate choice for patients with conditions including cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, congestive heart failure, chronic liver disease, kidney failure, and dementia, as well as other diseases known to be incurable. Symptoms such as pain, fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, or shortness of breath can be managed effectively. As patients gain control of their symptoms, their quality of life improves, even if the disease process does not.

Though palliative care and end-of-life discussions can be difficult for everyone, it is important for the topics to be addressed openly and well before end of life becomes imminent. Patients should talk about palliative care and treatment preferences with their loved ones and doctor early on and express their wishes should they become ill with a chronic or terminal illness. This provides sufficient time to arrange support services, to educate patients and their families on the disease course, and to truly enhance patients' quality of life.

Needless to say, palliative care and end of life are sensitive topics. They can be hard to broach with loved ones and with doctors. For this reason, primary care physicians, who have long-term relationships with patients, initiate conversations with patients about palliative care and end-of-life choices when appropriate and refer patients to programs or for services to meet their needs. These physicians approach the issues with sensitivity, and help patients navigate through their disease course with compassion and dignity. Families, friends, caregivers, and spiritual advisors also offer compassion, invaluable support, and input for patients facing these difficult decisions, helping to build an environment of trust and care on multiple, important levels for patients.

### **Plan, communicate, and document your preferences**

Choices regarding end-of-life care are difficult to make, but are much more stressful when left up to family members and friends in a crisis situation. To alleviate this burden from others should patients ever become seriously ill and incapable of making their own health-care choices, it is recommended that patients express and document their end-of-life wishes by completing a health care proxy and designating a health care agent. Doing so clarifies treatment instructions and alternatives.

Without documented wishes, confusion and discord among loved ones may create a crisis. This can lead to over-treating of patients, meaning extreme, “heroic” measures such as respirators, feeding tubes, and other forms of life-sustaining treatment could be administered, when in fact these may not have been what patients wanted. Documenting preferences, however, ensures they are honored.

### **Know the importance of palliative care and end-of-life planning**

Patients facing serious illness need compassionate care; relief from distress so they can live more comfortably; reliable information and access to help; and assurance that their treatment preferences will be honored. For more information about palliative care and end-of-life planning, talk with your doctor.

To fill out a health care proxy, visit the Massachusetts Medical Society website at [www.massmed.org](http://www.massmed.org) or the Five Wishes website at [www.agingwithdignity.org](http://www.agingwithdignity.org). You may also visit the Case Management Department at Sturdy Memorial for the documents and guidance for filling them out. Case Management can be contacted by calling **508-236-7680**.