

# Frequently Asked Questions

## End of Life Care in a COVID-19 Environment

### 1. What is palliative care?

“Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problem associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual.”

World Health Organisation

### 2. What does palliative care do?

Palliative care:

- Is applicable early in the course of illness
- Provides relief from pain & other distressing symptoms
- Affirms life and regards dying as a normal process
- Intends neither to hasten or postpone death
- Integrates the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care
- Offers support to help patients live as actively as possible until death and helps family cope during the patients' illness and for their own bereavement
- Uses a team approach to address needs of patients & their families, including bereavement counselling
- Will enhance quality of life & may positively influence the course of illness

Palliative Care Australia

### 3. What are the restrictions for family members visiting palliative patients with COVID-19?

Current visiting restrictions include:

- Specialist Palliative Care and Evaluation Care Unit (SPCEU) - no visitors, excepting patients on Care Plan for the Dying Person pathway, where 2 family members can be present.
  - Request for additional family members requires discussion with NUM and medical consultant.
- Inpatient units – this is determined by NUM and individual units on an individual basis.

### 4. What are the restrictions for spiritual requests e.g. priest visitation, for patients with COVID-19?

Chaplains are not able to visit the hospital or residential services, unless under the specific direction of a Nurse Unit Manager, usually exclusively for end of life care.

You may wish to ask the patient or family,

*Is religion or spirituality important to you as you cope with your current situation?*

*Would extra support by someone with a dedicated listening presence and emotional support help right now?*

Ask the patient if they would like to speak with a member of the Pastoral Care team. With permission, a referral can be made to pastoral care by Patient Flow Manager, email [chaplain@bendigohealth.org.au](mailto:chaplain@bendigohealth.org.au) or phone 5454 7688. Chaplains at home are able to make phone calls to patients and offer video based pastoral care through the Bendigo Health's telehealth website at

[www.bendigohealth.org.au/telehealth](http://www.bendigohealth.org.au/telehealth) between 11am and 12noon weekdays.

5. What happens to a patient with COVID-19 once deceased? Are extra precautions required for preparation of the body? What communication is required with mortuary?
- Suspected or confirmed patients with COVID-19 are placed in leak-proof body bags, with an ID bradma sticker located on the outside of the bag. Opening the bag should not be required after the patient is taken to the mortuary (Care of the Deceased Adult interim protocol).
  - Mortuary assistant will be aware of additional requirements as the body will be wrapped in a leak-proof body bag.
  - Mortuary assistant is to wear PPE as per protocol
6. What palliative care principles can assist staff to alleviate dyspnoea in patients with COVID-19? Non-pharmacological measures include:
- Positioning – support with pillows, pressure relieving devices and other equipment as required
    - sit upright
    - legs uncrossed
    - allow shoulders to droop
    - keep head up
    - lean forward
  - Relaxation techniques – meditation, music, counting, reading – ask the patient what they prefer
  - Reducing room temperature
  - Cooling the face using a cool flannel or cloth

Pharmacological measure include:

- Opioids and anxiolytics – refer to guidelines listed below

**DO NOT USE** fans (ceiling, portable, pedestal or hand held) or nebulisers to relieve dyspnoea for a patient suspected or confirmed with COVID-19.

7. What reporting is required for death of a patient with COVID-19? Who does the reporting and how are these deaths notified?
- Notification to the Department of Health by a medical practitioner is required for initial diagnosis or clinical suspicion of patients with COVID-19. Telephone 1 300 651 160 (24/7).
8. What other information for patients with COVID-19 having palliative care, should I know?
- The aim of palliative care is to help people have a good quality of life. This includes making sure patients receive care to live well and may involve:
- Managing physical symptoms such as pain, dyspnoea, and cough
  - Emotional, spiritual and psychological support
  - Social care, for example, assistance with washing, dressing or eating
  - Help for families to come together to discuss sensitive issues
  - Support to meet cultural obligations
  - Counselling and grief support
  - Referrals to respite care services
  - Providing care in patient's preferred place of care and place of death

## References

Bendigo Health PROMPT - COVID-19 and Palliative and End of Life Care in Secondary Care guideline

Bendigo Health PROMPT – Standard and Transmission Based Precautions Protocol

Bendigo Health guideline flow chart - Symptom management for adult patients with respiratory symptoms needing end-of-life supportive care outside of the ICU

State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). Notifiable infectious diseases, conditions and micro-organisms. Retrieved from <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases/notify-condition-now>

Palliative Care Australia. (2018). *National Palliative Care Standards (Edition 5)*. Retrieved from [https://palliativecare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2018/11/PalliativeCare-National-Standards-2018\\_Nov-web.pdf](https://palliativecare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2018/11/PalliativeCare-National-Standards-2018_Nov-web.pdf)

World Health Organisation. *WHO definition of palliative care*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/cancer/palliative/definition/en/>