

Palliative Care : Sharing the Journey

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As the death of the patient approaches, we often feel ill prepared for what lies ahead. We are afraid that we will not know what to say or do in the face of suffering. We dread the questions the patient may ask: Am I dying? What is going to happen to me? What can you do for me?

We do not know how to respond when patients ask us not to abandon them, when they ask us to journey with them. Sharing the journey involves sharing something of ourselves, not just our knowledge and our skills but our hopes, fears, and beliefs about the world in which we live. This is not spoken one to another but underlies the interaction - how we approach the patient, how we listen, what we do and the manner in which we do it.

The skill in palliative care is not only in knowing what to say but also in knowing the right questions to ask. It is in asking the right questions that we are able to unlock the thoughts

and feelings which, when expressed, release so much pain. We must also know when to keep silent. In the space of the silent moment much concern and empathy can be communicated.

But so often it is in our practical actions that we are best able to share the journey. Our attention to detail, our awareness of what is needed without having to be told, our focus on the patient rather than on the disease, as well as our acceptance that death is inevitable and that we too must let go. These are the ways we convey our willingness to be there for the patient.

This journey can be stressful and distressing. But it can also be a journey of shared growth and discovery as one person, who is not facing terminal illness at this time, struggles to understand the experience of the other who is grappling to make meaning of the relentless deterioration of the body and the resultant suffering of the body and mind. The practice of palliative care provides us with this challenge and opportunity.