Dealing with Patient Deaths

Communication

- Educate
  - It’s really upsetting for loved ones, prepare them for what they’ll see
    - Suctioning, snoring, pain meds, gurgling
- Communicate the medications you’re giving, what you’re doing before you do it
  - Talk to the patient as if they can hear, even if you don’t think they can
- Be careful about your wording and tone
  - Don’t come into the room all peppy and happy
  - Words matter
    - Do not say, “withdraw of care” - rather, “withdraw of life support”
    - People may think that if the focus shifts from survival that they will receive less time and care from the staff
- Don’t tell the family when/time frame, because you honestly don’t know and don’t want to fail to meet expectations

Practical things for you to do and know

- Know your institution’s policies and procedures
- Know when to notify the organ procurement team
- Know the specific needed paperwork (release of body)
- Remove restraints if appropriate
- Know post-mortem care procedures
- Know if the patient will be sent to the medical examiner because that will impact your post mortem care
Practical ways to support the family

- Ask about religious or spiritual preferences, as well as culture to ensure they are prioritized and observed appropriately
- Allow silence
- Don’t rush out of the room
- Make sure there are lots of tissues
- Utilize other support systems - chaplains (who are usually trained to be with people in crisis, whose focus is to provide spiritual support and not convert people to specific religions), child life specialists, family supports
- Transfer to a larger room, if possible

Palliative care and hospice

- “Palliative care is whole-person care that relieves symptoms of a disease or disorder, whether or not it can be cured. Hospice is a specific type of palliative care for people who likely have 6 months or less to live. In other words, hospice care is always palliative, but not all palliative care is hospice care.” ([Source](https://www.freshrn.com/))
- Can help put the big picture together

More resources

- [When Your Patient Starts Crying](https://www.freshrn.com/) - FreshRN Blog
- [I Wish I Could Cry With You, But I Can’t](https://www.freshrn.com/) - FreshRN Blog
- [How to Cope With Death as a Nurse](https://www.nrsng.com/) - NRSNG Podcast