HPC Consultation Services
Waterloo Wellington

Hospice Palliative Care
Tip of the Month – July 2016

When a Loved One is Experiencing End-of-Life Delirium

Support and Encouragement for Families and Caregivers

Delirium is an EOL complication that is often distressing to patients, families and caregivers due to its rapid onset and the accompanying changes in awareness, behaviour and cognition.

The health care team can support the families and caregivers by providing them with strategies that encourage them to play an active role in the care of their loved ones.

References:

- Pallium Canada. (2016). The pallium palliative pocketbook: a peer-reviewed, referenced resource. 2nd Ed.
- Cancer Care Ontario. (2010). Delirium in adults with cancer: screening and assessment.

How can the health care team support families and caregivers?

- Provide reassurance that these symptoms are caused by the illness and their loved one isn't going "insane".

- Include families and caregivers in discussions regarding any treatment plans and emphasize the shared goals of care.

- Provide extra support to families and caregivers during this difficult time (i.e., increase service provision, maintain regular contact, provide emotional support).

- Aim to provide consistent care providers who will be familiar to those experiencing delirium.

How can families and caregivers support their loved ones?

- Provide a well-lit, calm, and quiet environment with familiar objects. Having familiar people present may also be helpful.

- When loved ones experiencing delirium are agitated or hallucinating, provide gentle, repeated reassurance. Avoid arguing with them, as this may increase their distress.

- Prevent your loved ones from becoming overstimulated by limiting visitors.

- Place a calendar and clock in the room to help gently re-orient loved ones to time and place.

For more information, on managing delirium and other EOL symptoms, access the Cancer Care Ontario Symptom Management Guides online at:
https://smg.cancercare.on.ca/