

Communication in Palliative Care: Serious Illness Discussions

Serious illness discussions (also known as goal-setting discussions) are communications between health professionals and patients or families which focus on present or future illness-related values, perceptions, expectations or care preferences. Patients with serious chronic illnesses, and their families, benefit when these discussions are repeated, timely, culturally-sensitive, and actionable, and the ability to engage patients and families in these serious illness discussions is a best practice for palliative care clinicians. A systematic approach to these discussions identifies appropriate patients at appropriate times, has objectives planned when initiating a discussion, and uses a structured communication model to promote understanding and support. Serious illness discussions can have general objectives (intended to gain an understanding of the patient's values and knowledge) or specific objectives (intended to acquire information about planned treatments), and clinicians may benefit from an understanding of the research literature that has evaluated specific aspects of this framework, such as decisional control preferences, prognostic awareness, and advance care planning. Many communication tools have been developed to help clinicians structure these discussions.