

Background to the role of paramedics in providing palliative care

The role of the paramedic has historically been seen as providing life-saving emergency care and transportation to hospital. There are times though when paramedics are called to assist in situations where saving or prolonging life is not the goal of the patient or their family, or indeed consistent with good clinical practice.¹

An emerging role for paramedics in supporting palliative and end-of-life care, requires paramedics to develop a range of skills and knowledge that may not have been part of their entry-to-practice learning.

The skills that paramedics already have in communicating and eliciting goals of care with patients and families, are extremely valuable in this context, and mean that paramedics have a natural role in providing care to those with palliative care needs in the community.

It is helpful for paramedics to consider the acute clinical trajectory of the patient when making decisions about management and developing an understanding of how a decision regarding resuscitation, for example, can influence the ongoing care that the patient receives, which may not align with their goals of care. Improving knowledge in relation to the palliative approach to care will help paramedics to build confidence in making these kinds of decisions.



The situations in which paramedics frequently encounter those with palliative care needs are summarised here:²

PATIENT AND FAMILY SITUATION Awareness of dying, wishes are known	PATIENT AND FAMILY SITUATION Unaware of dying, wishes known
<p>Description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient with known end-stage life-limiting illness • Family aware that death is expected • Advance care plan has been documented and communicated. <p>Possible Paramedic Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptom management—after hours if palliative care team unavailable • Supportive communication • Emotional support/validation • Care after death. 	<p>Description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden deterioration of patient of very advanced age and/or with life-limiting illness • Family unprepared for patient’s death • Advance care plan documented/communicated. <p>Possible Paramedic Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptom management and/or resuscitation • Assess for reversible conditions (eg, sepsis) • Breaking bad news, supporting family decision-making • Emotional support • Review advance care plan and determine its application in this context.
PATIENT AND FAMILY SITUATION Awareness of dying, wishes not known	PATIENT AND FAMILY SITUATION Unaware of dying, wishes not known
<p>Description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient with known end-stage life-limiting illness • Family aware that death is expected • End-of-life wishes have not been discussed. <p>Possible Paramedic Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptom management • Assess for reversible conditions (eg, sepsis) • Breaking bad news, supporting family decision-making. 	<p>Description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden deterioration or cardiorespiratory arrest in patient with undiagnosed condition or complex comorbidities • Patient wishes never discussed. <p>Possible Paramedic Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptom management and/or resuscitation • Supporting family decision-making • Emotional support.

It should be noted that, paramedics will frequently encounter patients with known life-limiting illness that is not end-stage. They can be required to provide symptom management during episodes of acute exacerbation of symptoms, or if the patient develops an unrelated injury or illness. In this context, paramedics can consider a palliative approach to care by providing supportive communication with regard to goals of care and advance care planning.

Many people with advanced life-limiting illness wish to be cared for and die at home. Paramedics are often called to be involved in their care in situations of sudden deterioration or imminent death, and incidents such as a fall or injury, or transportation from one site of care to another.

Escalating care needs and the development of unexpected symptoms, or symptoms that are more distressing than anticipated, can be difficult for families and carers to manage alone. In addition to this, regular palliative care support and services might not be available after hours, and paramedics are called to provide care, support the family or residential care staff with symptom management, medication administration and/or transport the patient to hospital.³⁻⁶

In response to an increased focus on out of hospital palliative care, many services around Australia have developed specialised roles, undertaken by people who have advanced training and specialised equipment for supporting people with palliative care needs.³

PLEASE NOTE: It is not the intention of this learning guide to provide the kind of advanced training that paramedics in these roles have, but to provide an overview of the generalist palliative approach to care for paramedics who encounter people with palliative care needs in their day-to-day practice.

