

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Discussion of coronavirus infection with frail or elderly patients follows the template for breaking bad news:

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| 1. Determine awareness | <i>Find out what the person already knows or fears</i> |
| 2. Develop the message | <i>Sensitively convey essential information</i> |
| 3. Discuss the response | <i>Let the news sink in</i> |
| 4. Define the management | <i>What intervention is available</i> |
| 5. Decide on communication with others | <i>What should be said to others</i> |

DETERMINE AWARENESS

Always useful (and time efficient) to know what the patient is thinking. Listen before speaking.

“Can you tell me what you know about coronavirus?”

“Have you thought about what might happen if you caught the virus?”

“All this talk in the news about ventilators – what do you know about them?”

DEVELOP THE MESSAGE

Depending on the response to these initial questions, the conversation can be developed:

“The infection can be mild for some but very serious for others and I need to discuss this with you”

“Yes I’m afraid that is right – a lot of people have died from this infection ”

“I would love to think that if you caught it, you wouldn’t be badly affected, but we also need to prepare ourselves in case it was worse than that ”

“With your health already being poor, I honestly don’t think you would pull through if you caught it”

“I’m afraid I have to say that the cards would be stacked against you ”

“We have to think very carefully about ventilation/breathing support/admission to hospital and make sure that we provide that for people who are most likely to benefit I wish I could have better news for you, but to be honest, the chances of that helping you are small/remote, and it would mean spending your last days in unfamiliar surroundings and with nobody you know around you ”

“Unfortunately it isn’t just a case of going on a ventilator for a few days and then everything will be fine There are many other things which are likely to go wrong ” (*ie. referring to secondary infection, organ failure*)

If you need to challenge an unrealistic expectation:

“You are much more hopeful than I am about what would happen to you if you caught this”

“I wish I could share your optimism, but if I am to be honest with you, if you caught the virus it would be very serious indeed – and quite likely that you wouldn’t make it”

DISCUSS THE RESPONSE

“I can see that this is very upsetting for you”

“You have obviously thought about this and I can see that you are prepared for the worst ”

“You are being very realistic and brave about this ”

“Would it be helpful for me to go over that again?”

DEFINE THE MANAGEMENT

This stage would involve explanation of what care and support can be made available at home

DECIDE ON COMMUNICATION WITH OTHERS

“How should we explain this to your family/wife/husband/daughter etc?”

Would it be helpful if I explained all this to ?”

“Do you want to speak to your [relative] about what we have discussed? “Would it be any easier if we were to do that all together?”

SPEAKING TO RELATIVES

Adapt the above conversations if discussing anticipatory care.

Suggested phrases if giving notification of deterioration or death:

“When did you last hear about . . . ?

“I thought it would be best to let you know that she is getting weaker”

“I am phoning with some sad news for you. I am very sorry to tell you that he died about 20 minutes ago”