

Doctors 'need to tell patients when they are dying'

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Doctors must tell patients sooner that they are going to die and not see it as an admission of failure, according to professional guidance released today.

A culture in the medical profession of not wanting to be seen to "give up" means that patients end their lives in pain and indignity that could be avoided by honest conversations, the Royal College of Physicians says.

Medical students should have to help to tell a set number of patients they are dying before qualifying as doctors, the college suggests.

A two-year audit by the college found that thousands of people were dying in thirst and pain because doctors and nurses were terrified to talk about death.

The college accepts in its guidance that many medical professionals find it impossible to broach the topic with patients and offers advice to counter myths about the end of life. "These conversations are difficult but we need to get better at having difficult conversations," said Professor Dame Jane Dacre, immediate past president of the college, who wrote the report. "It's easier to give the next antibiotic without standing back and thinking, 'Will this help?'"

She said that even when both patient and doctor privately thought that the end was near, "everybody jollies each other along and nobody quite dares to broach the conversation", leading to interventions that dragged out death.

Her report said that doctors "perceived a culture among the public to avoid discussing death and to expect modern medicine to cure all ailments" while also feeling that "there remains a culture within the healthcare profession itself to see death as a failure, and a desire to 'always do something to help' that can result in unnecessary, aggressive treatment".

The college wants doctors to identify patients who might be in the last year of life and raise the topic of how they would like to be treated. However, it says making a prognosis is too inaccurate to give a definite answer to the question "how long have I got?", sug-

Case study

Wendy Buckle was 54 when she suffered a seizure out of the blue. Within six months she had died (Chris Smyth writes).

This is not unusual with the type of glioblastoma brain tumour that she had, but she and her husband, Peter, from Kenilworth, Warwickshire, were not told. "The picture painted was 'you'll go through a bit of a rough patch but come out the other side,'" Mr Buckle, 64, said.

He says this meant that the blow was even harder when, four weeks before his wife's death, a neurosurgeon advised him to "get some hospice care lined up". "That was the first and only intimation we had that it was going to be terminal," he said. He said had they known earlier how little time was left "we would have sailed away" and avoided her final weeks being in hospital.

gesting that doctors avoid specific answers and instead talk about "weeks to months" or "many months".

The guidance offers doctors ways to respond to beliefs that palliative care is "giving up" and that CPR would work as well as it does in television dramas. In fact it works less than 20 per cent of the time. Dame Jane said that trying to restart the heart of patients who were clearly dying led to "an undignified end" for many people.

The report also points out that medical students talk about death only to actors who are playing patients before they qualify, arguing that "great emphasis is placed on seeing a set number of births and engaging in other procedures — there should be an equivalent for end-of-life care training".

Jo Hayes, medical director at Marie Curie, said studies had "repeatedly shown that the majority of patients, if they have a terminal illness, would want to know how long they have".