New approach at end of life focuses on better communication and safety

By Christian Duffin

Nurses and other healthcare professionals who fail to give dying patients oral hydration and nutrition ‘when still possible and desired’ should face misconduct charges, according to new guidance on end of life care.

The Department of Health (DH) last week published a new approach to care for the dying, Priorities for Care, which replaces the controversial Liverpool Care Pathway (LCP).

It was drawn up in response to Baroness Julia Neuberger’s independent review of the now defunct LCP, published in July last year.

An advisory group comprising 21 organisations, including the RCN, Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and Macmillan Cancer Care, and known as the Leadership Alliance for the Care of Dying People (LACDP) prepared the new care approach on behalf of the DH.

The approach focuses on five priorities, including the importance of sensitive communication with families, respecting patient wishes and regular revision of care plans.

The reason for any intervention during end of life care must be explained to the dying person and their families.

At the start of each shift the name of a registered nurse responsible for leading the nursing care of the dying patient should be allocated and this nurse will be responsible for communicating effectively with the family, ‘checking their understanding, and ensuring that any emerging concerns are addressed’.

Care plans

The LACDP agreed with most of Baroness Neuberger’s previous recommendations, confirming that end of life care should be based around constant reviewing of care plans, not on ‘processes’ that had previously resulted in some patients being denied food and drink after being placed on the LCP.

RCN long-term conditions adviser Amanda Cheesley was the college’s representative on the LACDP.

She told Nursing Standard the priority for nurses is to keep people comfortable, and involve patients and their families in decisions about their care.

‘We won’t focus on tick-box processes from now on, but on the comfort and safety of the person who is dying,’ she added.

‘This will ensure more frequent reviews, which should be done at least daily.’

In the wake of the publication of Priorities for Care, England’s chief nursing officer Jane Cummings is writing to all nurses to remind them of their duties to support patients who wish to eat and drink.

‘The NMC has included a clause in its new draft code of professional conduct outlining ‘fundamentals of care’, including ensuring patients have adequate access to nutrition and hydration.

Ms Cummings said: ‘The new priorities of care will promote a culture of compassion that puts people and their families at the centre of decisions about their treatment and care.’

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