How to care for a patient after death in the community

Rationale and key points
This article provides nurses with information about how to care for a patient after death, and support their family and loved ones in the community setting.

- Care after death involves supporting the family and significant others, and providing personal care to the patient.
- It is important to ensure privacy, dignity and respect of the deceased and to recognise this is a sensitive and difficult time for families.
- Staff undertaking care after death should be offered support.
- Local and national guidelines should be followed.

Preparation and equipment
- It is acknowledged that nurses may not always be involved in care after death in the community setting. Funeral directors or other healthcare professionals may undertake this role. For ease of reading, the term ‘nurse’ will be used in this article.
- The nurse should identify and attend to patient and family preferences and cultural beliefs when performing care after death. They should be aware of any advance care planning documentation for the patient to fulfil their wishes.
- The nurse should be aware of the circumstances in which a death would be reported to a coroner, for example if the death is unexplained. If a death appears suspicious, the police must be contacted immediately. In this case, the patient’s body should not be washed and mouth care should not be performed. All devices and prosthetics must remain in place.
- The nurse should ensure the necessary equipment is available, including:
  - Occlusive tape.
  - Gloves and an apron.
  - Clean sheets.
  - Towel.
  - Slide sheet or hoist sling.
  - Toothbrush or sponge sticks.
  - Absorbent pads or dressings or continence pad or pants.
  - Clinical and domestic waste bags.
  - Bowl.
  - Spigot(s).
  - Verification of death forms.

Procedure
Those undertaking personal care for the deceased should ensure their privacy, dignity and respect at all times.

1. Record the time of death and time of verification of death in the patient documentation and on the verification of death form. This can be completed by a nurse with this extended role or the patient’s GP, while

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adhering to local and national guidelines (Hospice UK and National Nurse Consultant Group (Palliative Care) (NNCG) 2015).

1. Contact the next of kin and significant others to inform them of the patient’s death if they are not present. Be aware that receiving such news may be distressing.

2. Acknowledge and discuss any preferences that the patient or family have noted that relate to the care after death procedure. This may include cultural or religious preferences or requirements.

3. Inform the GP of the patient’s death.

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5. Contact the funeral director chosen by the family to arrange removal of the deceased.

6. Wash your hands and put on appropriate personal protective equipment, including gloves and an apron, before undertaking any personal care, as per local policy.

7. Position the patient on their back using the appropriate equipment, as per local manual handling policy. It is important to straighten the limbs before rigor mortis begins.

8. Close the patient’s eyes by applying light pressure for 30 seconds.

9. Wash the patient, using a bowl, water, toiletries and towel. The patient’s toiletries can be used if they are available. Ensure that the patient’s privacy and dignity are maintained. Family members may wish to be involved with this aspect of care, and it is important that this is confirmed and they are aware of what to expect. Family involvement may not be appropriate if there are infection control issues.

10. Perform oral hygiene using a toothbrush or sponge sticks. This may include cleaning and reinserting the patient’s dentures. If you are unable to reinsert the dentures, they should be sent to the funeral director with the body.

11. Shaving a recently deceased person is not recommended, since the skin is still warm and bruising and marking may appear days later (Hospice UK and NNCG 2015). The funeral director can shave the patient at a later date, if the family requests this.

12. Drainage and intravenous catheters can be removed. If the death is being referred to a coroner, or to the procurator fiscal in Scotland to investigate the cause, all devices and prosthetics must remain in place.

13. Use absorbent dressings and occlusive tape to prevent any leakage from wounds or drainage sites, to protect staff from any exposure to body fluids.

14. The body continues to excrete fluids after death. Apply or position pads to absorb any leakage and prevent soiling. Spigots should be used to prevent any drainage devices from leaking.

15. Place a clean sheet beneath the deceased, using appropriate manual handling equipment, such as a slide sheet or hoist sling, and adhering to local manual handling policy.

16. Discuss with the family if any jewellery on the patient is to be removed or left in place. If any jewellery remains on the body, this should be recorded in the funeral director’s documentation. If the patient is not in their home, follow local policy regarding the patient’s property.

17. Dress the deceased in clean personal clothing. You should take into account the family’s preferences and adhere to local policy, especially if the deceased presents an infection risk to the funeral director.

18. In preparation for removal of the body by the funeral director, place a clean sheet over the deceased. This may include covering the deceased’s face in accordance with the family’s wishes. If there is a high risk of infection, a body bag provided by the funeral director should be used (Health and Safety Executive 2005).

19. Dispose of used equipment according to local policy. Use clinical waste bags for the disposal of any waste considered infectious or hazardous. To reduce the risk of cross-infection, decontaminate your hands by washing or using alcohol hand gel (Loveday et al 2014).

20. Provide the family and significant others with an opportunity to discuss or reflect on the death and care provided to the deceased.

21. Record all actions carried out in the medical and nursing documentation.

**Evidence base**

Following national recommendations, the term ‘last offices’ has been replaced by the more inclusive term ‘care after death’ (Hospice UK and NNCG 2015). Personal care after death refers to physical care of the patient’s body. Nurses should view care after death as a continuation of the person-centred care they provided while the patient was alive. It is important that the care which nurses provide to the patient after death conveys respect for the patient and their family, and fulfils any religious or cultural obligations or beliefs (Leadership Alliance for the Care of Dying People 2014, Martin and Bristowe 2015).

Healthcare professionals develop unique relationships with patients and may also grieve for the deceased. It is important to recognise distress in colleagues following care after death and provide appropriate support. Positive experiences in relation to care after death, alongside additional support and education, can enable staff to develop coping strategies in the future (Gerow et al 2010).
The nurse should discuss the patient’s personal care after death with the family and significant others from the outset, and reflect on the non-verbal cues exhibited by them. It is important that the family and loved ones do not feel pressured into being involved in personal care after death. Although these individuals may have been present at the patient’s bedside before and after death, the nurse should not assume that they will choose to be involved in personal care after death (Martin and Bristowe 2015).

References


