ABC OF PALLIATIVE CARE
SECOND EDITION

Edited by Marie Fallon and Geoffrey Hanks
Foreword by Derek Doyle

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ABC OF PALLIATIVE CARE

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Contents

Contributors vi

Foreword viii

1 The principles of palliative care
   Balfour Mount, Geoffrey Hanks, Lorna McGoldrick 1

2 The principles of control of cancer pain
   Marie Fallon, Geoffrey Hanks, Nathan Cherny 4

3 Difficult pain
   Lesley Colvin, Karen Forbes, Marie Fallon 8

4 Breathlessness, cough, and other respiratory problems
   Carol Davis, Gillian Percy 13

5 Oral health in patients with advanced disease
   Jeremy Bagg, Andrew Davies 17

6 Anorexia, cachexia, nutrition, and fatigue
   Kenneth Fearon, Matthew Barber 21

7 Nausea and vomiting
   Kathryn Mannix 25

8 Constipation, diarrhoea, and intestinal obstruction
   Nigel Sykes, Carla Ripamonti, Eduardo Bruera, Debra Gordon 29

9 Depression, anxiety, and confusion
   Mari Lloyd-Williams 36

10 Emergencies
    Stephen Falk, Colette Reid 40

11 The last 48 hours
    James Adam 44

12 Palliative care for children
    Ann Goldman 48

13 Communication
    David Jeffrey 52

14 The carers
    Julia Addington-Hall, Amanda Ramirez 56

15 Chronic non-malignant disease
    Marie Fallon, Joanna Chambers, Francis Dunn, Raymond Voltz, Gian Borasio, Rob George, Roger Woodruff 59

16 Community palliative care
    Keri Thomas 68

17 Bereavement
    Marilyn Relf 74

18 Complementary therapies
    Michelle Kohn, Jane Maher 78

Index 83
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It is almost impossible for a health care professional to avoid being called upon to care for people getting frailer as life ebbs away, to care for them at their dying and to have to help and support their loved ones afterwards. Who can be insensitive to their pain, their breathlessness, their weakness and their fears? Who can forget how helpless they have felt at these times, how lost for words, how unskilled and unprepared. Doctors and nurses, whether generalist or specialist, can no more avoid these professional and personal challenges than they can deny or avoid death itself.

Palliative care – "the care of patients with active, progressive, advanced disease where the prognosis is short and the focus of care is the quality of life" – is a basic human right, not a luxury for the few. Its principles are not peculiar to the care of the dying but are the integral features of all good clinical care – freedom from pain and the alleviation so far as is possible, of all physical, psychosocial and spiritual suffering; the preservation of dignity; the utmost respect for honesty in all our dealings with these patients and their relatives.

The emergence in 1987 of palliative care as a medical sub-specialty (mentioned in the Preface to the first edition of this book) has brought about improvements in care, research, professional education and training, and in the understanding by the public and the politicians of what needs to be done and what can be done for those at the loneliest time on their life journey. It has also had a downside. Many have come to suspect that providing palliative care requires unique people to do justice to this demanding work, unique skills to do it well, and more time than today's doctors and nurses ever have. So easy is it to phone a palliative care specialist whether working in a hospital, a specialist unit or in the community, and get advice or an admission that some are leaving the palliative care of their patients to them. In fact only about 10% of terminally ill patients have problems so rare or so complex that specialist expertise is needed. All the others can be cared for by non-specialists if they learn the principles of palliative care, if they develop the right attitude to it, if they are willing to share themselves as well as their therapeutic skills… and if they study this book. One thing is undeniable – no-one is born with a built-in ability to provide excellent care. It has to be learnt from a book such as this, and hopefully from watching others with more experience, but that is a luxury some never have.

In situations where too often the knee-jerk response can be "there is no more we can do", the reader will find that there is always a means of helping and of caring. It may be pharmacological or psychological, nursing or physiotherapy, occupational therapy, music or art therapy, or complementary medicine. Often it may be no more, no less than enabling patients to open their hearts in that atmosphere of safety created by the doctor or nurse who has learned to be honest, and is humble enough to listen and to learn.

The reader will be surprised at how richly rewarding palliative care can be; how surprisingly often terminally ill patients speak of the sense of safety they feel when suffering has been relieved and they know everyone is being honest with them and the loved ones they will leave behind. This can happen anywhere – in a hospital, in a hospice, in a nursing home or in someone’s home.

This excellent book produced by editors and contributors with international reputations deserves to be read by every doctor and nurse who will ever offer palliative care – and that means most of us!

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