ABC OF PALLIATIVE CARE
Second Edition
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Contributors

James Adam
Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Hunter’s Hill Marie Curie Centre, Glasgow

Julia Addington-Hall
Professor of End-of-Life Care, University of Southampton

Jeremy Bagg
Professor of Clinical Microbiology, Glasgow Dental Hospital and School, Glasgow

Matthew Barber
Consultant Surgeon, Edinburgh Cancer Centre, Edinburgh

Gian Borasio
Interdisciplinary Palliative Care Unit, Department of Neurology, Munich, Germany

Eduardo Bruera
Professor of Oncology, UT MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, Texas, USA

Joanna Chambers
Consultant in Oncology and Palliative Medicine, Southmead Hospital, Bristol

Nathan Cherny
Director of Cancer Pain and Palliative Medicine, Share Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel

Lesley Colvin
Consultant Anaesthetist, Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh

Andrew Davies
Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Royal Marsden Hospital, London

Carol Davis
Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Moorgreen Hospital, Southampton

Francis Dunn
Consultant Cardiologist, Stobhill Hospital, Glasgow

Stephen Falk
Consultant in Clinical Oncology, Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre, Bristol

Marie Fallon
St Columba’s Hospice Chair of Palliative Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh

Kenneth Fearon
Professor of Surgical Oncology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh

Karen Forbes
Macmillan Professorial Teaching Fellow in Palliative Medicine, Department of Palliative Medicine, Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre, Bristol

Rob George
Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Meadow House Hospice, Middlesex

Ann Goldman
CLIC Consultant in Palliative Care, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, London

Debra Gordon
Clinical Nurse Specialist in Palliative Medicine, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh

Geoffrey Hanks
Professor of Palliative Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol

David Jeffrey
Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Borders General Hospital, Scotland

Michelle Kohn
Complementary Therapy Adviser, London

Mari Lloyd-Williams
Professor, Academic Palliative and Supportive Care Studies Group, Division of Primary Care, University of Liverpool, Liverpool

Lorna McGoldrick
Clinical Nurse Specialist, Palliative Care, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh

Jane Maher
Consultant Oncologist, Mount Vernon Cancer Centre, Middlesex

Kathryn Mannix
Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Marie Curie Centre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Balfour Mount
Professor of Palliative Medicine, Department of Oncology, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Gillian Percy
Clinical Specialist Physiotherapist, Moorgreen Hospital, Southampton

Amanda Ramirez
Professor of Liaison Psychiatry, Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College, London

Colette Reid
Research Fellow in Palliative Medicine, Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre, Bristol
Marilyn Relf
Head of Education, Churchill Hospital, Oxford

Carla Ripamonti
Palliative Care Physician, National Cancer Institute of Milan, Milan, Italy

Nigel Sykes
Medical Director, St Christopher’s Hospice, Sydenham, London

Keri Thomas
Macmillan GP facilitator, Shrewsbury

Raymond Voltz
Consultant Neurologist, Institute for Clinical Neuroimmunology, Munich, Germany

Roger Woodruff
Director of Palliative Care, Austin and Repatriation Centre, Heidelberg, Victoria, Australia
Foreword

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!

Derek Doyle
Retired consultant in palliative medicine
Vice President, National Council for Palliative Care
Founding Member and Adviser,
International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care