Project development

Following a successful bid from North West NHS Regional Innovations Fund, the “Think about it” tool was developed to prompt patient-led communication (Fig 1). The tool was developed to initiate earlier discussions about advance care planning and determine patients’ priorities for care. It was developed, implemented and evaluated by professionals from East Lancashire Hospice and NHS Blackburn with Darwen community nursing services. The project was led by the end-of-life care lead and clinical practice lead for community nursing.

After feedback from hospice professionals, community nurses, primary healthcare teams and allied health professionals, we showed the tool to East Lancashire Hospice day therapy patients, and presented at a GP patient forum meeting.

Around 20% of the 145,000 people living in Blackburn with Darwen are Asian, so the tool was also shown to Asian carers. It was then translated into Urdu and a design company was recruited to improve its appearance. The final “Think about it” prompt incorporated 12 topics.

Implementation

Principles for implementation were agreed (Box 1), and the tool was piloted across Blackburn with Darwen between March and August 2010. We also provided copies of the tool to mental health and motor neuron disease services, and care homes.

Evaluation

A questionnaire was sent to all health workers who used the prompt over the five-month pilot. Of the 50 questionnaires sent out, just under half (22) were returned. The evaluation included questions about the number of times the prompt had been used, and whether it increased the professionals’ awareness and confidence to support discussions with patients.

The completed evaluations showed the topics discussed by patients included family, friends and pets, medical care and support, and legal issues (see Fig 1).

Feedback from hospice day therapy professionals suggested the tool triggered discussions with patients. One patient said the tool’s subtle and indirect approach meant he felt more able to consider topics that concerned him. Discussions at the GP patient forum meeting also suggested people wanted to discuss important issues and the prompt helped them to do this.

The number of completed PPC documents and advance care planning discussions increased during the pilot phase, although this cannot be attributed solely to the prompt as “quality in healthcare is a multifaceted concept” (Sutherland and Coyle 2009). We also identified ways to improve implementation, such as leaving a paper copy with patients after discussion. The tool also received positive feedback from NHS Blackburn with Darwen Patient Advice and Liaison Service Readers Group.

Conclusion

Effective communication is vital to delivering high-quality care at the end of life, but professionals need training and support to maintain confidence and develop their skills. A team approach was vital to the success of the communication prompt, and partnership working across the region has improved the overall implementation of end-of-life care initiatives, improving outcomes for patients and their families. NT

References


Marie Curie Palliative Care Institute (2009) Liverpool Care Pathway for the Dying Patient. Liverpool: MPCI. tinyurl.com/Marie-Curie-LCP