Who's who in a palliative care team

Summary

- Palliative care is provided by a team of healthcare professionals with a range of skills to help you manage your life-limiting illness.
- Your palliative care team works together to meet your physical, psychological, social, spiritual and cultural needs and also helps your family and carers.
- Talk to your general practitioner or get in touch with the palliative care service in your local area to discuss your needs.

Palliative care is provided by a team of healthcare professionals with a range of skills to help you manage your life-limiting illness. Your palliative care team works together to meet your physical, psychological, social, spiritual and cultural needs and also helps your family and carers.

The members of your palliative care team may include:

- doctors
- nurses
- allied health professionals
- volunteers
- carers.

Types of doctors in a palliative care team

If you are diagnosed with a life-limiting illness, you will probably see a range of doctors, including:

- physicians and surgeons
- general practitioners
- palliative care consultants
- psychiatrists.

Each doctor will provide a different type of medical care and the types of doctor you see will depend on the kind of illness you are diagnosed with.

Physicians and surgeons

Your physician or surgeon is a specialist in a particular area of medicine. They will diagnose you and give you information about the disease you have.

Different types of physicians or surgeons include:

- oncologists – diagnose and treat cancer
- neurologists – diagnose and treat nerve diseases
- respiratory physicians – diagnose and treat lung diseases.

There may be other types of physicians or surgeons that you see.

General practitioners

Once you leave hospital, or after you have been diagnosed by a physician and if you can still live at home, you will need to see your general practitioner regularly.
Your doctor will manage your ongoing care while you can still live in the community.

Palliative care consultants
Palliative care consultants are medical doctors who have completed specialised training in the care of people living with a life-limiting illness. They usually deal with complex cases and work at hospitals or residential aged care homes that have dedicated palliative care units.

Psychiatrists
Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have specialist training in mental health conditions. They can provide emotional and mental health support for you while you are dealing with a life-limiting illness. Fees for psychiatrists are usually paid by Medicare. However, it is a good idea to ask about any additional costs that you may have to pay.

Palliative care nursing
Nurses manage most of your ongoing care and treatment while you receive palliative care in a hospital and they can also provide palliative care nursing services to you at home. They assess, plan and administer your daily treatment and manage your symptoms.

Every Victorian region has palliative care nurse specialists who can speak to you about what you need to manage your illness and continue living at home. Contact the palliative care service in your local area to discuss your needs.

Allied health professionals in palliative care
Allied health professionals are university-educated health practitioners who work as part of your palliative care team. They help treat symptoms, manage day-to-day tasks, offer emotional support and provide rehabilitation services.

Types of allied health professionals include:
- counsellors
- dietitians
- music therapists
- occupational therapists
- orthotists and prosthetists
- pastoral care workers
- pharmacists
- physiotherapists
- podiatrists
- psychologists
- social workers.

Palliative care volunteers
Palliative care volunteers are members of the community or family members who provide their services to people with a life-limiting illness and their families for free. They are recruited, trained and managed by local palliative care services and can offer practical help around the home, provide emotional support, and help with running errands.

Availability varies from region to region, so speak to your care provider about the options available near you.

Often, a family member who is already providing support to someone with a life-limiting illness will undertake specialist training through a volunteer program run by a local palliative care service. This ensures their loved one gets the support they need while still being cared for by a family member.

Complementary therapies and palliative care
It is common for complementary therapy practitioners to provide treatment at the same time as conventional
medical professionals to manage pain and other symptoms relating to a person’s life-limiting illness.

Complementary therapy is known by different terms including:

- alternative therapy
- alternative medicine
- holistic therapy
- traditional medicine.

Types of complementary therapies include:

- acupuncture
- Alexander technique
- aromatherapy
- herbal medicine
- naturopathy
- osteopathy
- Reiki
- yoga.

Carers in palliative care

Many people living with a life-limiting illness will have a family member, friend or paid care worker who lives with them or visits regularly to help manage their symptoms and do tasks around the home. ‘Carer’ can refer to both paid and unpaid carers.

For some carers, providing palliative care at home means they have to provide around-the-clock nursing-type care for someone with high-support needs. They might have to help with all daily living tasks such as feeding, bathing, dressing, going to the toilet and taking medication. Other carers have a less intensive caring role where the person they care for is quite independent but might need extra help with tasks like banking, shopping and housework.

Where to get help

- Your local palliative care service
- Your doctor
- Your local health service
- Palliative Care Victoria, call (03) 9662 9644