**END OF LIFE – HANDOUT (Last days/hours of life)**

It is important to know what to expect when someone is near the end of life. This handout contains information to help you understand what usually happens and the care we give, when someone is believed to be in the last days and hours of their life. Nothing can take away the feelings of grief but having information may help you cope at this anxious time. This handout will hopefully answer some of your questions. However, if you have any more questions, please ask the Office for support .

We would like to provide the best care and support possible to our clients. Therefore we offer our clients the opportunity to tell us what is important and what matters to them, and how we can best support them.

**Recognising dying**

It can be hard to know when a person is entering their final days and hours. If it is possible to discuss changes in physical health and decisions about care with the client, a care manager will do this. However, the person who is coming to the end of their life may not be well enough to communicate. For this reason, the views of family and friends are very valuable in planning and giving the best care to the client. Some people die very quickly with little warning and others gradually become worse over several days. Occasionally, people believed to be dying improve and their condition stabilises. The following are suggestions about things that are often described as important:

* Food and drink - We provide food and drink for as long as needed to help someone feel comfortable. It is normal for someone who is dying not to want much food or drink, and so sips of water may be enough.
* Religious, spiritual, emotional and cultural needs - When someone is approaching the end of their life, they may find talking to someone can provide support and be comforting to them. Often this support comes from family and friends but sometimes it helps to talk to someone who is not related. The client may wish to have any religious and spiritual needs supported by a representative of their faith. If a client is being cared for in hospital or in a hospice, there are chaplains from different religions available to support them.
* Place of care - Some people know where they want to spend their last days. However, these views can change. Care in the person’s own home or in a care home – some people in hospital would prefer to be cared for in their home or in a care home at the end of their life. If this is the case, doctors and nurses will decide to get your loved one home as quickly as possible, if appropriate care and support can be arranged. When they are at home, district nurses will visit depending on your loved one’s nursing needs. The following services are available at home depending on nursing needs:

• Community specialist palliative care nurses (Macmillan)

• Your loved one’s GP

• Palliative care support team

* Hospital care – if a client is being cared for in hospital, family members can stay with them any time of day or night. The ward staff will tell them about the facilities that are available within the hospital such as showers, food and drink and car parking.
* Hospice care – some people may wish to be cared for in a hospice at the end of their lives. In this case, the health professional involved in the client’s care can discuss this further and contact the hospice.

**Medication When a patient is believed to be dying**

Doctors will discuss whether the medication they are taking is still helpful. If swallowing medication becomes difficult, it may be given in a way that is easier for the patient, such as by an injection. A range of drugs will be prescribed that can be used if any troublesome or distressing symptoms occur, such as pain-relieving or anti-sickness medication. Sometimes patients are given a syringe driver which is a small, portable pump (see figure 1). This can be used to deliver continuous medication by injection day and night.



Figure 1

Figure 1 shows a portable medicine pump

**Changes in appearance - Every death is different.**

It is impossible to predict how someone will look in their final hours but there are certain common physical changes that you may notice:

• People often become drowsy, spending much of their time sleeping.

• Their skin may become pale and moist. Their hands and feet may feel cold.

• As they get more unwell, they may have very little interest in their surroundings, even their close family. This is a natural part of the process.

• Eventually they may become unconscious. For some people, this period will be short but for others it may last several days. Though unconscious, they may still be aware that you are there, be able to feel your touch and be able to hear your voice.

• This may be followed by breathing changes, until breathing stops.

**Other changes**

* Restless moving - A person who is dying may sometimes become restless. This is usually caused by chemical changes in the body that affect the brain. This may be relieved by medications. Restlessness can also be caused by emotional distress. If this is the case, the client may find it helpful to talk to a trusted professional, close friend or spiritual or religious leader.
* Incontinence - A person who is close to death may lose control of their bladder and bowels. This can be helped by equipment such as incontinence pads or a catheter (a narrow, plastic tube that goes into the bladder).
* Pain - Someone who is in the last days of life may not be able to tell us they are in pain. For this reason, we need to look out for signs such as grimacing (screwing up their face), moving about as if they are in discomfort, and sweating.

**Breathing changes**

When someone is dying, the pattern of their breathing may change. Their breathing may become fast and shallow or there may be long gaps between breaths. Occasionally, breathing may become noisy due to fluid collecting in the airways. Although this can be distressing to hear, it does not usually seem to cause distress to the dying person. District Nurses will monitor things closely and may suggest using a medication or changing their position.

**The final moments of life**

For many people, the final moments of dying are peaceful. Breathing becomes slower and more irregular with long gaps in between breaths. Eventually, they stop breathing. This might take place over a few minutes, but it can be a longer process. Often the person’s body will relax completely, and they may look very peaceful.