

Diagnosing Dying

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this session, the participants should be able to:

1. Anticipate and discuss the common physical and psychological signs of impending death.
2. Consider/reflect on the impact that these signs could have on the child and family.

Why is it important to diagnose dying?

- End of life care is a small part of children's palliative care trajectory
- Preparation for family and staff to support dying person
- Signs and symptoms to observe – enable good symptom management
- One chance to get it right for child and family to experience a 'good death'

Video link

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CruBRZh8quc>

Physiology of dying

- Occurs when vital organs no longer function
- Digestive and respiratory systems begin to shut down
- Loss of mobility and becoming bed bound
- Loss of interest or ability to drink and eat
- Cognitive changes – increased time sleeping or developing delirium

Signs and symptoms

- Increasing weakness and tiredness leading to child being unable to get up and therefore spending time
- Reduced conscious levels, meaning child will be sleeping a lot more
- Episodes of unconsciousness with no time awake
- Lack of interest or ability in eating and drinking
- Irregularities in heartrate due to metabolic changes

Signs and symptoms ctd..

- Coolness of skin especially extremities as body works to ensure vital organs have good circulation
- Breathing pattern changes – Cheyne Stokes breathing
- Difficulty in swallowing – in the days/hours before death can lead to pooling of saliva at back of throat – often referred to as 'death rattle'

Recognising when death occurs?

- Heart stops beating and breathing stops (circulatory and respiratory systems fail to work)
- Temperature changes in skin
- Discolouration of skin due to blood pooling (livor mortis/lividity)
- Stiffening of the body (rigor mortis)

Summary

- There are many signs of impending death for a child
- Parents need to be informed of the potential signs so that the family can be prepared beforehand and lessen their anxiety

Some useful resources

People to follow on Twitter -
 Dr Kathryn Mannix — @drkathrynmannix
 The Good Grief Project — @GoodGriefProj
 Bryan Nolan — communication
 @BryanNolan5
 All Ireland Institute of Palliative Care
 @AIIPPC
 Irish Association of Palliative Care
 @palliatwre
 Irish Hospice Foundation - @IrishHospice

