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When to Refer to Palliative Care:

Part Two

Dean Schuyler, MD, and Leonard C. Alsfeld, MD

EDITOR'S NOTE

Through this column, we hope that practitioners in general medical settings will gain a more complete knowledge of the many patients who are likely to benefit from brief psychotherapeutic interventions. A close working relationship between primary care and psychiatry can serve to enhance patient outcome.

Dr Schuyler is a psychiatrist and a member of the palliative care team at the Ralph H. Johnson Veterans Administration Medical Center, Charleston, South Carolina. **Dr Alsfeld** is chief medical resident at the Medical University of South Carolina.

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Corresponding author: Dean Schuyler, MD, Geriatrics/
Extended Care, Ralph H. Johnson Veterans Administration
Medical Center, Charleston, SC 29401 (deans915@comcast.net).

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There is continuing discussion that adapting to a serious medical condition would be aided by meeting with a mental health professional. A survey¹ of outpatients with a major medical illness seen in a medical clinic has led to a second survey. The second survey incorporated many of the elements of the first one and added to them. Rinah Shopnik, DO, who runs the oncology clinic at the Ralph H. Johnson Veterans Administration Medical Center in Charleston, South Carolina, was concerned that we were missing something while caring for our outpatients. That “something” is an emotional element that might be remedied by allowing patients the opportunity to talk with a knowledgeable mental health professional.

The second survey (Figure 1), which was created by Dr Alsfeld, was given to 151 outpatients at our hospital. A point was assigned for each positive response. Seventy-three respondents met at least 1 of the following criteria: a mean survey score > 16 points (of 22 questions), > 12 hours a day spent in bed, ≥ 4 hospitalizations in the past year, and anyone who checked, “If you would like to speak with someone, please check this line.” The survey identified 73 outpatients appropriate for a professional to speak with. Each of these outpatients was then called by a member of the hospital staff and asked if they would like to speak with a mental health professional about adjusting to their medical condition. Of the 73 patients identified, 28 responded that they would like to speak with someone.

Each of the 28 outpatients was called by Dr Schuyler. An attempt was made to set these meetings in tandem with other medical appointments that the patient already had established at the hospital. Sixteen evaluative appointments were set up. When appointments were not possible, a lengthy telephone call was done. The remainder of the patients would be called closer to a planned visit to the hospital or were not available when called. Once all of the patients who asked to be seen have been evaluated, a future survey will assess whether the visit with a psychiatrist to discuss adjustment to their illness was helpful.

REFERENCES

1. Schuyler D. When to refer to palliative care. *Prim Care Companion CNS Disord*. 2016;18(6):e1–e2.

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Figure 1. Palliative Care Survey: Part 2^a

Name _____

Chart # (last 4 digits) _____

Date: _____

- | | | |
|---|--------|-------|
| 1. Do you suffer from pain daily? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 2. Do you experience a loss of appetite? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 3. Do you have disrupted sleep? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 4. Do you have diarrhea or constipation? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 5. Do you feel tired? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 6. Do you feel angry? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 7. Do you experience shortness of breath regularly? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 8. Do you have diminished activity? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 9. Do you experience nervousness or anxiety? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 10. Do you experience sadness or depression? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 11. Has your body image changed? | Yes___ | No___ |
| 12. Do you have difficulty planning this stage of life? | Yes___ | No___ |

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| 1. Is your time spent with usual activities | Less than usual___ | Unchanged___ | More than usual___? |
| 2. Is your degree of nervousness/anxiety | Less than usual___ | Unchanged___ | More than usual___? |
| 3. Is your degree of sadness/depression | Less than usual___ | Unchanged___ | More than usual___? |
| 4. Is your mobility (walking) | Less than usual___ | Unchanged___ | More than usual___? |
| 5. Is your activity inside (or outside) the house | Less than usual___ | Unchanged___ | More than usual___? |

1. How well do you understand your provider's recommendation for treatment? Minimally___ Moderately___ Fully___

2. Major illness category:

- ☐ Cancer
☐ Heart disease
☐ Lung disease
☐ Stroke
☐ Dementia
☐ Other

3. How many hours do you spend in bed each day? _____

4. How many hospital admissions have you had over the past year? _____

If you would like to speak with someone, please check this line: _____

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