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Discussing treatment options with a patient nearing the end of their life

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Background: We have recently commenced a communications training program for junior medical staff aimed at improving the way we discuss treatment options with patients who are nearing the end of their lives and who present to the hospital with an acute life-threatening problem.

Aim: This workshop is limited to max. 16 participants. It would require one large room that could be divided into 4 role play stations, or 4 smaller rooms. We would provide facilitators and actors.

Methods: The workshop consists of a 30-minute presentation, followed by role play sessions. The presentation discusses the technique that we recommend for these conversations, where the focus shifts from “avoiding death” to “understanding the patient’s values”. We provide a 7-step plan to managing these conversations. The role play section involves participants rotating in groups of 4 through 4 different simulation stations where they will have a conversation with an actor playing the part of a patient. In the scenarios, the patients are those with chronic co-morbidities and advanced functional limitation who present with acute life-threatening conditions. Participants are encouraged to try the 7-step process, and are provided with immediate feedback from a trained facilitator.

Conclusion: Only 12 % of our junior medical staff feel that these skills are adequately taught in their undergraduate degree. We have found that participants at the workshop have felt significantly more comfortable holding these conversations after attending.