

section 8.1: considering self care in challenging circumstances

the role of self care for health professionals

Working with palliative patients and their families can offer clinicians some of the most profound opportunities for professional and personal growth and satisfaction. Whilst clinical encounters can be both rewarding and challenging, it is important to acknowledge that working in a palliative setting can also be demanding and stressful. Recognising and accepting both aspects of the work helps us to develop realistic expectations for ourselves, to establish appropriate boundaries, and put in place protective strategies that will sustain us in practice.

Whilst staff in acute care wards may encounter palliative patients on an irregular basis, the impact in emotional and spiritual terms must be appreciated:

- staff may be exposed to frequent and intense interactions in which human dignity, strong emotions and repeated losses are an integral part of the working day
- such interactions may force us to confront our own mortality, the meanings that we attach to life and even our role and capacity in caring in these circumstances
- acknowledging this aspect of “emotional labour”¹ is vital in order that we as individuals, and those responsible for staff, can plan for our health and welfare accordingly.

managing stressors in the workplace

Positive ways to manage these stressors include strategies which focus firmly on the role of balance in our lives; “the balance between giving and getting, between stress and calm, between work and home”.²

Recognising the positive benefits offered by working with palliative patients and their families is a valuable technique for reflection. These may include:

- having the chance to make a difference at a really difficult time in a patient’s life
- providing a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment
- personal satisfaction in the achievement of goals such as the effective relief of suffering³
- opportunities for open and honest communication and significant interactions with patients and their families
- finding a sense of meaning and purpose in work⁴
- fun and humour in the workplace, even in the darkest of times, can also provide a valuable means of dealing with tension and sadness and in maintaining perspective for staff, patients and family.⁵

references

- ¹ Hoschild A (1983) *The managed heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkley.
- ² Malash C. *Burnout-The cost of caring*. New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1982, pg 147
- ³ Webster J, Kristjanson L (2002) "But isn't it depressing?": The vitality of palliative care. *J Palliative Medicine*18; 15-24.
- ⁴ Ablett J, Jones R (2006) Resilience and well-being in palliative care staff: a qualitative study of hospice nurses experience of work. On line *Psycho-Oncology*, Dec 2006.
- ⁵ Dean R, Gregory D (2004) Humour and laughter in palliative care: An ethnographic investigation. *Palliative and Supportive Care* Vol 2:2, 139-148.