

Developing the Role of Speech Pathology in Palliative & Supportive Care

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Background

Speech pathology plays an important role in the assessment and management of communication and swallowing difficulties in individuals with life-limiting illnesses (Pollens, 2012). The Palliative and Supportive Care Unit (PSCU) at Eastern Health (32-beds) provides multidisciplinary palliative and supportive care services to individuals admitted for end-of-life care, respite, symptom control, or discharge planning.

The objective of this project was to scope current services provided by speech pathology to the PSCU, and to develop recommendations to guide them in providing evidence based, patient-centred care to palliative patients.

Methods

A literature review to investigate the role of speech pathology in the palliative setting was completed. A one-month audit of speech pathology services, reason for referral, medical diagnosis, outcomes of admission and breakdown of clinical contact time was completed to determine current service provision.

Results

The literature review did not provide any guidelines identifying best practice for speech pathology intervention in palliative care. The audit revealed nursing and medical staff generated 70% of all speech pathology referrals. 81% of referrals were for swallowing assessment, however 61% of patients also presented with an unidentified communication or cognitive difficulty. This suggests that patients with communication or cognitive changes in the absence of swallowing difficulties are less likely to be referred to speech pathology. The need for management of communication difficulties was indicated by 32% of clinical time spent assisting patients to communicate with family, friends and the health care team.

Discussion

The need for speech pathology management of communication difficulties was highlighted, evident by the high percentage of clinical time managing such difficulties. The low referral rate for communication and cognitive difficulties suggests other health professionals have reduced awareness of the full scope of practice of the speech pathologist and the importance for individuals to be able to communicate with family, friends, and health care providers.

References

- Pollens, R. (2012). Integrating Speech-Language Pathology Services in Palliative End-of-Life Care. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 32(2), pp. 137-148