

IPE Elborn College Series
Dealing with the Death of a Client

Case of Jeff

Jeff is a 34 year old married truck driver with 2 young children. He was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) 2 years ago after he began to experience coughing, choking when eating, slurred speech and difficulty hearing his truck dispatcher over the communication radio. He was also feeling very fatigued most of the time. Within three months of his diagnosis, he could no longer drive his truck, could not walk on his own and had difficulty sitting up straight and holding his head up. Around that time was his first visit to the out-patient ALS clinic at University Hospital in London. Soon he was extensively involved with the team, including the social worker, who helped him to apply for the Ontario Disability Support Program and spent time with Jeff and his wife and children supporting their emotional adjustment to Jeff's illness. The speech language pathologist worked with him to ensure safe swallowing strategies, and to offer communication strategies to augment his speech production and the audiologist helped him to access devices and services to compensate for his deteriorating hearing. The occupational therapist prescribed a wheelchair for Jeff, assessed his home environment, and recommended modifications and assistive devices. The physiotherapist looked at his decreasing respiratory capacity, his strength and mobility and set him up on a program to maintain as much strength and mobility as possible. The nurse, amongst other things, assessed Jeff's vitals on every visit and together with the pharmacist, educated Jeff and his wife about the various medications he needed to take. The physician monitored the progression of the disease, prescribed medications and decided when the time came, to send Jeff to the OR for a tracheotomy to improve his air exchange.

A year later, Jeff is admitted to UH on a week-end with pneumonia. During the following week, he enjoys extended visits and therapy sessions with the members of the ALS team, all of whom want to take advantage of the time that Jeff is in hospital to work with him on his goals. In two weeks, he and his family are planning a little holiday at an accessible resort in Muskoka. He is really looking forward to this time away with his family and the team is working with them to organize the supplies, equipment and supports that he'll need while at the resort. Knowing that Jeff's energy level is pretty low, several members of the team decide to do a joint assessment with Jeff that Friday. By assessing him together, they can reduce the number of questions and the physical exertion required by Jeff when various team members do their assessments separately. When the team enters the room, Jeff smiles at them and says that while he loves all the attention, he is really tired today. Can they come back on Monday? The team agrees, but before they leave, Jeff tells them one of his many jokes. No one ever leaves an interaction with Jeff without a smile on their face.

Monday morning, the team gathers for an update regarding the week-end events on the unit. The nurse sadly informs the team that Jeff died last night from complications related to his pneumonia.

Questions

- It's your first time experiencing the death of a client, and you had a caring therapeutic relationship with Jeff. How do you seek support from your team? How does the team support each other?
- How do you deal with Jeff's wife when she arrives on the unit later that day? Is it OK to cry in front of her? What if you fall apart? What kind of professional boundaries do you need to maintain? How do you support Jeff's wife when you yourself feel devastated?
- What are the roles that each discipline may carry out in follow-up to Jeff's death? (eg. Contacting community programs/services that Jeff was involved in)