

Our responsibilities as healthcare professionals don't end when a patient dies. One of the hardest jobs we have is breaking the news to those who were closest to them. We would all prefer to do this face-to-face, especially if it's unexpected, but it is perfectly acceptable - and sometimes necessary - to tell someone about a death by telephone.

This news should, where possible, be given by someone who knows the patient and understands the care they have received. With your colleagues, consider who is best placed to make this call; this could be any member of the team. Find somewhere quiet and consider what you're going to say.

Usually, you should phone as soon as possible, having first clarified who is to be contacted. Typically, this is the next of kin, but sometimes it may not be. It may also be documented what the patient's family or friend would want to be told over the telephone and what times of the day or night they would want to be contacted.

It's not unusual to feel anxious about making a call like this. Remember to take your time, and when you're ready:

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Dr Hughes calling from Ward 12 of the City Hospital."

Pay attention to the speed and tone of your voice. This can communicate just as much as the words you say.

"Am I speaking with Mr Singh?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Hello Mr Singh, I know we haven't met before. I'm sorry to call you at this time of night. Is it okay for you to talk just now?"

"Yes, I'm just watching the telly, one sec."

"Is there anyone there with you, Mr Singh?"

"Yes, my daughter's here with me."

"I'm calling to speak about your wife. Would you like to come into the hospital, or are you okay to talk on the phone?"

Usually they will want to know what has happened straight away, although some people may prefer to come in. In this case, you might suggest that they bring someone with them, and remind them to travel safely. Sometimes people may interrupt you to ask whether a person has died. This can be unsettling, but we must answer honestly. Try to avoid the use of euphemisms such as 'passed away'.

"Adia – has she died?"

“I’m so sorry to tell you this, but she became very unwell this evening, and sadly, yes, she has died. I’m very sorry to give you this news over the phone.”

It can be difficult to establish how a person is reacting to this news when speaking by phone. Don’t feel you need to fill any silences. Offer the opportunity to come in to have another conversation face-to-face. Those who are newly bereaved and in shock are unlikely to remember all that has been said.

They may also take solace in spending time with the person who has died. Confirm that the family know where to come and inform staff so they are met promptly. At the end of the call, ensure that they know what will happen next and consider restating your name and providing your contact details.

“Thank you, doctor. We’re on our way.”

“Of course, Mr. Singh. We’ll see you soon.”

Document the conversation in the patient’s notes and update the relevant team with any outstanding issues.

Communicating by phone can add additional complexity to already challenging conversations. Even when the news of a death is delivered with sensitivity and empathy, people can have a wide range of reactions. Try to ensure that you attend to your own wellbeing, and consider if you would benefit from some support or time to yourself. If a colleague witnessed you delivering bad news over the phone, perhaps seek their feedback on what you did well. Encouraging and supporting members of your team may help you all manage similar situations in the future.

The film was produced in April 2019 and can be found at www.sad.scot.nhs.uk or <https://vimeo.com/328655124>

For more information visit www.sad.scot.nhs.uk or contact supportarounddeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk