

Case Study with Discussion Questions

Douglas Perry is a seventy two year old inmate at a Groveland State Prison, a small state correctional facility. He has been at this facility for thirty-seven years and is serving a 50 year sentence. Last month he was diagnosed with late stage cancer of the lung. Since he is terminally ill, the prison administrative staff want to arrange for a compassionate release or a transfer to a regional medical unit where they have more resources to care for him. He wants to stay where he is because the staff and inmates at Groveland are all the 'family' that he has. Mr. Perry has asked the nurses to see what they can do to keep him at Groveland saying he would rather die among friends than die alone. The guards say that if he stays, he is to get 'no special treatment' because then everyone will expect special treatment. The nurses and the staff MD feel they can care for him and keep him comfortable with minimal changes to the established routines. They agree to prepare a proposal for the warden addressing end of life care on behalf of Mr. Perry and others who might have similar requests in the future. There are no policies regarding palliative treatment, dietary provisions, visitation, or end of life care. After reviewing the literature to get some ideas about how other facilities are handling the needs of the terminally ill and meeting with the healthcare team the nurse prepares a proposal to submit to the warden.

If you were the nurse, you would consider the following questions to develop the proposal. Can you think of anything else that might help to convince the warden?

1. Who should be included in drafting the proposal? Co-workers, volunteer caretakers from the prison population, supervisors, healthcare team members and other staff who will participate in caring for Mr. Perry should be included. Mr. Perry, if he is able, could also contribute to the discussion to help everyone understand his wishes and expectations for spiritual care, DNR etc.
2. What main topics should be covered? Describe with as much detail as possible the roles and responsibilities of each of those involved. Suggest a daily schedule including any special activities regarding meals, bathing, exercise, medication administration, treatments etc. List any additional resources that might be needed such as a wheelchair, bedrails, commode, oxygen etc. Consider safety, risk for falls, universal precautions and comfort measures. Prepare a cost estimate for these resources. Address pain management with special emphasis on drug security and use of complementary pain relief strategies. Recommend a visiting schedule that will accommodate his family and will not tire Mr. Perry. Explain care at the end of life including spiritual care, clearly articulating Mr. Perry's understanding of DNR and the healthcare team's concurrence. Check on the procedures for funeral arrangements and describe any variations that might be required.
3. How would you help the guards understand the importance of compassionate care at the end of life? Conversations about the end of life within the context of the prison experience are a good place to begin. Bring in chaplains or hospice staff to give an inservice and guide a discussion. Have several sessions to give everyone a chance to think about questions or concerns. Field questions with an open, accepting attitude and be patient, for many this is a major change.
4. What other concerns might surface throughout this process and how could they be addressed? "What if...?" questions will be asked frequently during the discussions with the guards, the staff and the warden. Here are a few you might hear: what if there were 10 prisoners all dying at the same time? What if there is lots of blood? what if the warden changes his mind? What if the other prisoners want special treatment? What if Mr. Perry doesn't die? Rather than try to answer them, use them as points to begin a discussion. Finding other facility models for end of life care would be very helpful in giving examples and taking advantage of lessons learned.