Making care decisions in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)

Information for families and caregivers

In the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), we make a plan of care for each patient. This plan helps patients with life-threatening illnesses.

This plan may be to use life support while we try to cure the illness. It may also include treating pain and any other symptoms your loved one may have.

Our ICU team will meet with you to talk about what treatments may help and work with you to make care decisions.

This booklet will share:

• what life support is
• how decisions about treatment are made in the ICU
• how life support may affect your loved one
• how our ICU team helps and supports you

Remember
You are not alone. Our ICU team is here to support and help you in any way we can. Please ask us any questions you have, any time.

Adapted from brochure "What to expect in the last days and hours of life" (D-5908) by Princess Margaret Palliative Care, Social Work, Spiritual Care and Patient and Family Education Program
What is life support?

Life support can help support your loved one while we try to cure their very serious illness or keep it from becoming worse.

Life support may include:

- a ventilator (breathing machine) to help the patient breathe
- medicines, such as adrenaline, to raise blood pressure and keep the heart pumping
- a large intravenous line (tube) placed into the main or central vein
- a feeding tube to provide nutrients
- devices that check how well these treatments are working

Life support can be very hard on your loved one. They can sometimes cause problems, and these problems can also be very serious. This is why we very carefully check whether or not these treatments would help.

How are decisions about treatment made in the ICU?

We will meet with you to talk about what kinds of treatments, including life support, may help. Your loved one always takes part in any decision making. But, if they are very seriously ill, they may not be able to.

By law, if a person cannot make decisions about their care, the ICU team must work together with the person’s Substitute Decision Maker (SDM). The law lists, in order, the person (or people) who act as the SDM. The SDM works with the ICU team to help decide on the right treatment for the patient.

The patient may have legally chosen a person who they want to make care decisions for them when they are not able to. This person is called their Power of Attorney for Personal Care (POA). In this case, the POA becomes the SDM. If you know that the patient has a legal POA document, please bring it to the hospital.
How does a substitute decision maker (SDM) decide the right treatment to choose?

By law, an SDM makes care decisions that follow the patient’s wishes. If these wishes are not known, the substitute decision maker makes decisions that would be in the patient’s best interests. This means thinking about other values and beliefs that matter to the patient.

This includes thinking about whether a treatment will:

• improve their health
• prevent their illness from getting worse
• slow down how quickly the illness becomes worse
• benefit them more than any risk of harm
• help just as well as a more invasive treatment (such as a breathing machine)

Decisions can take time, and we will work with you to make the right decision for your loved one. But, there are times when the ICU team may need decisions to be made quickly. We will help you with the decisions at every step.

Will life support help my loved one?

If life support is the right choice, we hope it will work. But, we can’t be sure that it will.

Sometimes the treatment doesn’t work because the patient is too ill to survive. In these cases, we will talk to you about not increasing or even removing life support to keep your loved one from suffering. **We will always talk to you about any changes to the care plan.**

If you feel that life support treatments are not helping, please talk to us.
How long will my loved one be on life support?

It is hard to know how long your loved one will need to be on life support. This time may change depending on how they respond to treatment and whether any problems happen.

Problems that could happen include:

- infections from the breathing machine, the intravenous line, dialysis lines or devices that check on how the patient is doing
- severe diarrhea
- blood clots
- bleeding
- strokes or heart attacks

These problems can be very serious and even life-threatening. If they happen, we will tell you what they are and how they will affect your loved one’s chances of getting better.

This is a difficult time. What if I need help to remember or understand the information?

We understand this is a very difficult time for patients and the people closes to them. There is a lot of information, and it can be hard to understand it all.

The ICU team members will explain what is happening as many times as you need for you to understand. Let us know if you think setting up a meeting with members of the health care team will help.

Once you understand what is happening and the treatment choices, we will work with you to make the right decisions. Please ask as many questions as you like. We are here to help.