

**Cynthia Bieda DNP, FNP-C, APNP,
ACHPN**

Unity Hospice Medical Team &
Assistant Professor for Graduate
MSN/DNP FNP Program, Bellin
College



Support That Starts Sooner, Not Later: Because Comfort, Clarity, and Choice Should Begin at Diagnosis

Prioritizing early care for better patient outcomes



Why Early Support Matters



The Case for Support at Diagnosis

Challenges at Diagnosis

Diagnosis triggers emotional shock and uncertainty, making early support crucial for patients and families.

Importance of Early Support

Starting support at diagnosis reduces anxiety and improves trust and decision-making confidence.

Person-Centered Care

Early support fosters compassionate care that respects patient values and prevents crises.

The Diagnosis Experience

Emotional, Cognitive, and Practical Impact

Emotional Challenges

Diagnosis triggers emotions like fear, grief, and anger, which can hinder information absorption and coping.

Cognitive Overload

Patients face complexity with medical terms, treatment options, and uncertainty, causing cognitive overwhelm.

Practical Impact

Diagnosis affects work, family roles, finances, and daily routines, requiring immediate adjustment.

Need for Early Support

Early emotional and informational support stabilizes patients, enabling thoughtful, values-aligned care decisions.



Defining Early Support



What Early Support Really Means

Holistic Early Care

Early support begins at diagnosis and complements disease-directed treatment with symptom relief and emotional care.

Interdisciplinary Teamwork

Care involves physicians, nurses, social workers, chaplains, and specialists working together for whole-person support.

Patient-Centered Priorities

Focus on comfort, autonomy, and understanding to meet patients' values and preferences throughout care.

Normalize Care Conversations

Early support encourages open discussions about goals, values, and expectations to improve decision-making.

Comfort



Why Comfort Must Begin Early

Physical and Emotional Comfort

Comfort covers physical symptoms like pain and fatigue as well as emotional issues such as anxiety and depression.

Importance of Early Attention

Addressing comfort early prevents symptom escalation and shows commitment to alleviating patient suffering.

Role of Communication

Compassionate communication reduces distress and supports emotional well-being in patients.

Supporting Patients and Families

Early comfort care improves patient engagement and helps families cope with their loved one's condition.

Clarity



Providing Understanding in a Time of Uncertainty

Importance of Clear Communication

Clear, honest, and compassionate communication helps patients understand their diagnosis and treatment options effectively.

Health Literacy Support

Using plain language, visual aids, and teach-back methods enhances patient understanding and health literacy.

Empowering Patient Participation

Clarity empowers patients to ask questions, weigh options, and actively participate in their care decisions.

Building Confidence and Shared Decision-Making

Early clarity builds patient confidence and supports shared decision-making throughout the care journey.

Choice

Honoring Autonomy Through Early Choice

Early Patient Engagement

Supporting patient choice from diagnosis fosters shared decision-making aligned with personal values.

Advance Care Planning

Introducing advance care planning early helps patients reflect on priorities without crisis pressure.

Overcoming Barriers

Addressing time, discomfort, and systemic barriers ensures patients can make informed care choices.

Improved Patient Outcomes

Early supported choices increase satisfaction and control during difficult healthcare experiences.

Evidence and Outcomes



Benefits of Early Support for Patients and Systems

Improved Patient Quality of Life

Early supportive care enhances patients' quality of life by reducing symptoms and increasing satisfaction.

Reduced Healthcare Utilization

Integrating support early decreases unnecessary hospitalizations, emergency visits, and lowers healthcare costs.

Enhanced Communication and Understanding

Early support fosters clearer communication and alignment of care with patient goals and values.

System Efficiency and Clinician Wellbeing

Early support optimizes resource use and reduces moral distress among healthcare providers.

Evidence To Support Earlier Intervention

An article by Baslie et al. (2026) outlines the importance of unmet needs in palliative care patients and earlier intervention

BACKGROUND: Patients in palliative care setting with terminal disease did not readily express their needs leading to missed opportunities for support

CONCLUSION: the study identified five key areas to improve outcomes and provide a deeper understanding of emotional and psychological experiences for advanced illness

1. Seeking empowerment through daily support
2. Need to contain the risk of losing dignity
3. Support in managing disease progression
4. Understanding and openness of the future
5. Seeking existential support

Key take away: the need to acknowledge at end of life

Implementation Strategies

Making Early Support a Reality

System and Practice Changes

Early support requires system-level and practice-level changes such as routine distress screening and automatic referrals

- McGill Quality of Life Questionnaire
- Hospice Quality of Life Index

Role of Providers and Healthcare Team

Advocates, educates, and coordinates care that is essential for initiating supportive conversations with patients

Team Collaboration and Leadership

Successful implementation depends on leadership support, teamwork, and commitment to patient-centered care



Case Study: Early Support at Diagnosis

Patient Profile

Mr. James Walker is a 68-year-old patient recently diagnosed with stage III lung cancer. The diagnosis was delivered during a busy clinic visit, and treatment options (chemotherapy and radiation) were discussed quickly.

Since the diagnosis:

- Mr. Walker reports **increasing shortness of breath and fatigue**
- He appears overwhelmed and asks, “How bad is this really?”
- His spouse expresses concern about **managing symptoms at home**
- No formal distress screening or palliative care referral has been initiated

The oncology nurse notices that Mr. Walker seems anxious and uncertain about his care plan and initiates a conversation to explore his needs and understanding.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Starting Support Sooner, Not Later

The sooner providers and healthcare systems can incorporate resources for support sooner into the patient disease process the greater the outcomes for the patient related to

- Quality of life
- Cost of care
- Provider burden
- Family/ support system outcomes

CALL TO ACTION: incorporation of palliative care and hospice care provide the patient with an added layer of care



Questions?

Please feel free to reach out with any questions regarding palliative and hospice care

Cynthia.Bieda@bellincollege.edu

Cynthia Bieda, DNP, FNP-C, APNP, ACHPN

References

- Basalie, I., Letteria, C., Bellani, A., Rusconi, D., Zappata, S., Caraceni, A., & Lusignani, M. (2026). Unmet needs of palliative cancer patients: A grounded theory study. *American Journal Of Hospice & Palliative Medicine*. 43(6), 585-594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10499091251336452>
- Eischens, MJ., Elliot, BA., & Elliott, TE. (1998). Two hospice quality of life surveys: a comparison. *American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Care*, 15(3), 143-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104990919801500308>
- N.a. (2026). What are palliative care and hospice care? *National Institute on Aging*. Retrieved from <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/hospice-and-palliative-care/what-are-palliative-care-and-hospice-care>