



Communication challenges with COVID-19.

4. Phone call to impart serious news

It may not be possible for close family members and whanau to spend time with very sick and/or dying loved ones. Healthcare professionals or volunteers may be in the position of phoning people to impart serious news about the condition or death of a loved one.

This is harder to do by phone than face-to-face because it is harder to show care and compassion without non-verbal communication.

Remember: 'the smallest kindness' can make all the difference. You are not powerless.

Here are some skills that will make it easier:

Framework for discussing serious news by phone

Framework: PCR	Purpose	Examples
Preparation – before you call		
What can you find out about the patient?	To provide comfort where possible to the loved ones of someone who is critically ill or who has died. Check you are calling the next of kin or, failing that, someone given as a contact on the front sheet.	Seek anything you can find out about what is happening or has happened to that person, that can provide comfort to someone who cannot be or was not present. It may be something a nurse has said about the person, something the person themselves wishes to pass on, or something you heard about their character or nature.
What do you need?	To ground yourself so you can be present with the person/people you are calling. Try and find a private space to call from.	Use a ritual that helps you come back to the present. It may be something as simple as touching the greenstone round your neck, or saying to yourself: 'may I be of service'. Find one that works for you.
Call		
Introduction and check you are speaking to the right person	Establish connection	<i>Can I check I am speaking with the daughter of My name is []; I am one of the nurses/volunteers] at 'X' facility. Are you the right person for me to talk to about [persons name]?</i>

	Check whether there are supports present. Ask permission to have the conversation	<i>Is there anyone there with you at the moment? Is now an OK time to talk?</i>
Give the serious/bad news	Give the news in short 'chunks' and stop: they are very likely to be overwhelmed and will most likely not hear anything else.	<i>I am afraid that I have some serious news [pause]. Your grandmother has a severe pneumonia[pause] . I am worried that time is now short...she may die very soon.</i> OR <i>I am afraid I have some very sad news. Your grandmother died in the early hours of this morning</i>
Expect an emotional response +/-silence	Checking in is needed rather than more information imparting at this stage.	Leave silence. They may speak. If not and you feel you need to say something: <i>I am so sorry that this is happening/ has happened"</i> <i>I can't imagine how this is for you</i> Leave silence again.
They start asking questions	Answer slowly as best as you can	<i>She was very comfortable when the nurse checked in on her, and died around 4am this morning."</i> <i>"The virus unfortunately caused a serious pneumonia.</i>
Recommendations		
Supports		<i>Right now, is there someone you can talk to about this?"</i> <i>"Is there someone else you would like me to call?"</i>
Next steps		<i>Call the GP to inform of death – may be another support for family.</i> <i>Explain the process from here with regard to burial/cremation/funeral arrangements</i>