Preface

Death. Are you ready?

Simple, but complicated. Pessimistic, but optimistic. Morbid, but cathartic. I have asked myself this question many times over the 20 years since it was posed to me and noted that the answers become surprisingly more complex with experiences and responsibility. For me, however this question is currently hypothetical. For the palliative care patient, this is the daily question as they live with the knowledge that death is imminent. This is the question the patient’s caregivers and physicians constantly grapple with as the patient’s clinical situations wax and wane on the way to an end that is guaranteed. This is the question that underlies every decision that is jointly made and every decision to treat or not to treat. This is the question that transcends religion, culture, ethnicity, gender, and age.

Becoming at peace with the situation (dying) and the known outcome (death) is the ultimate goal for the palliative patient, the caregiver, and the healthcare team caring for the patient. In order to allow for this ideal mental catharsis, the patient must be comfortable and every aspect of this comfort must be examined. Relieving pain, treating sleep disturbances, and addressing depression and anxiety are some of the cardinal features of effective palliative care. This book goes on to look at each organ system and how to maximize its comfort.

The goal of the book was to provide a resource that is usable in all countries, providing straightforward data as well as food for thought for providers worldwide. Its design by Howard Smith, MD, was brilliant in its simplicity as well as its breadth of coverage. It is useful both for the student and resident physician being first exposed to death and dying as well as the palliative care specialist that may be an expert in one facet of the patient’s disease, but not in others. After reading this book, it was Dr. Smith’s goal to arm the reader with a new set of tools in their daily responsibility and to be the best provider possible for their patients. It is meant to spawn interest in further reading on topics of interest and to promote future directions of study.

The text starts with an introduction to palliative care as a specialty, situations unique to the palliative care patient, and the mind-body connection. The next section focuses on palliative management related to different organ systems as each of these patient groups faces a novel set of concerns. Next, treatment of specific symptoms is discussed. These chapters provide excellent detail on the differential diagnosis of various signs and symptoms, and standard as well as creative treatment options ranging from the very traditional to the futuristic. Finally the book concludes with discussion of special conditions that may occur in palliative patients.

It was a great honor to be able to take over the task of editing this text from Dr. Smith and to continue working with his long-time associate Pya Seidner, MEd. I am a better provider for having this knowledge and I am confident that using this text will afford readers the same experience.

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