WHAT ARE COMFORT CARE ORDERS?
A guide for Relatives and Friends of Dying Patients

The doctor is writing a special set of orders for your relative to make his or her last hours or days as comfortable and peaceful as possible. The orders are meant not to prolong life, but to allow nature to take its course. Comfort care orders will ensure a pain-free, quiet passage from this life in as dignified a manner as possible.

- We will give your relative pain medication and anti-nausea medication if needed, through the intravenous route, subcutaneous route, or sometimes by mouth or skin patch. Also, if breathing sounds moist and labored, we can give medications to dry up secretions so breathing is a little less difficult. (The morphine that is given for pain also allows people to breathe with less effort and struggle.)

- We can also give medications for anxiety, restlessness and confusion. These medications can be calming and allow a more peaceful rest.

- We will position your relative as you and patient desire to make him or her as comfortable as possible. We won’t change position routinely to minimize any discomfort.

- We will no longer take vital signs such as blood pressure, pulse, temperature or blood sugar readings. We will also discontinue cardiac monitoring and checking oxygen saturation to ensure the highest level of comfort.

- No lab tests, no needle pokes, no medications unless needed for comfort.

- Your relative can eat or drink anything he or she can tolerate, including food and alcoholic beverages you may bring from home. It is OK if your relative does not want to eat or drink.

- If your relative can’t drink fluids, we will moisten his or her mouth with dabs of water and keep lips from drying out with ointment. You can do this if you wish also. Eyes can also get dry; we can provide special eye drops if this happens.

- Too much fluid in a dying person’s body can actually cause more discomfort. Lungs can fill up, making breathing difficult and wet sounding. Uncomfortable swelling in the legs, arms and torso can appear, and people may even throw up, making it necessary to pass a tube into their stomach. Studies are showing that natural dehydration, which occurs during the dying time, may release natural painkillers, making the process less painful than we may imagine.

- A visit from a favorite pet may provide comfort to your relative.

- The hospital chaplain may call on you. If you wish, your own clergy may be contacted to provide emotional and spiritual support.

- Your physician may make a referral to our Case Management department for help in planning for discharge with hospice services if there is a possibility that your relative will leave the hospital.

- If you have any questions or concerns about comfort care orders, please don’t hesitate to ask the physician and nurses caring for your relative. We know this is a very difficult, stressful time for you and want to ease as much of the burden as we can.

Adapted from Sacred Heart Medical Center, Eugene Oregon