Coping When a Loved One is in the ICU

An Intensive Care Unit (ICU) is an area in the hospital where people are cared for who are seriously ill or injured. A person may be admitted to the ICU as a planned part of a hospital stay, such as after major surgery. Other people are admitted unexpectedly after a heart attack, an accident or due to a serious infection.

How is an ICU different from other units in the hospital?

- An ICU has special equipment to monitor and support a person's body systems, such as the heart, lungs, or kidneys, when they are not working well.
- Each nurse is assigned to care for 1 to 3 patients.
- The health care team has special training in the knowledge and skills needed to care for critically ill people. The health care team includes doctors, nurses, therapists, dietitians, social workers, pharmacists and technicians.

Visiting a patient in the ICU

Visiting loved ones who are critically ill or injured is not easy. You may feel a little frightened when you are in the ICU visiting. There will be many machines in the room attached to the patient. Most of the machines have lights, displays and make sounds. These machines are used to support or monitor the patient. Please ask questions about the machines, tubes and other equipment. The more you understand about what is going on, the more comfortable you will feel when visiting.
• The ICU family waiting area is open 24 hours a day.
• Be sure to **clean your hands well with alcohol based hand sanitizer or wash them well with soap and water** before and after you visit the patient.
• Your family member or friend will need much care and attention from the ICU staff. You need to get permission from the nurse to visit a patient before entering the unit. The ICUs have volunteers to help with visiting. If a volunteer is not on duty, use the phone system or intercom. It is located in or near the waiting area. A secretary will answer your call and check with a nurse to see if you may visit. Sometimes the activity of caring for patients prevents visiting at the scheduled time. If this happens, you will be allowed to visit as soon as possible.

**Suggestions for visiting your loved one**
• Let the patient know you are there. Even if the patient is not as alert as normal, a familiar voice can be a comfort.
• Do not be afraid to touch the patient. Ask the nurse for help if you are uncomfortable with the equipment around the bed.
• Be supportive. Let the patient know that you are there to help.
• Listen when the patient wants to talk. If the patient cannot talk, writing notes may be possible. Ask the nurse for help.
• Share the well wishes of friends and family.
• Plan your visits to allow rest periods for both you and the patient.
• Sometimes a patient may become restless or upset during your visit. Ask the nurse for help or suggestions.
• Learn about the patient's illness and care. Ask the nurse if printed materials are available.
• A private meeting room is available in some ICUs for family conferences. This room can be opened by a volunteer or a nurse.
• Having a loved one in an ICU for several days is exhausting. We encourage family members to obtain lodging so you can get enough rest and nutrition. If you do stay overnight in the hospital, you need to get a "visitor pass" from security. You must stay in the Atrium on the 5th floor overnight. Let the nurse know you will be there so they may
contact you if needed. If you are uneasy about leaving, or need help finding somewhere close to stay, please ask the nurse or the Volunteer.

- We appreciate your help in keeping the waiting area clean. The area is for your comfort and convenience.

**Communicating with the health care team**

Most families feel that honest and current information is one of their most important needs. The health care team wants you to understand what is happening with your family member. They may need information from you, especially if the patient is not able to speak.

Here are some ways to help you communicate.

- Identify a family spokesperson. This person can help to pass on information from the staff to the rest of the family.

- If you are the spokesperson, ask the nurse how to get information by telephone. Make sure you know how to reach the hospital unit and that staff know how to contact you.

- Get to know the members of the health care team. Arrange times to meet with them on a regular basis.

- Share information about your loved one, such as past and present health problems, medicines used, and any use of drugs or alcohol. Also, tell us about the patient's support systems and who may be visiting the patient in the hospital.

- The nurse spends the most time with the patient and is a good source of information. Find out who the nurse is each shift.

- Seek information and ask questions. Make a list of questions or concerns to help you prepare for meetings with staff.

- Write down information you receive from hospital staff to help you remember.

- Let staff know when you do not understand something or if you feel you have received conflicting information.
Take care of yourself

Families have little or no time to prepare for the stress of a critical illness or injury. You may feel afraid, angry, helpless, anxious or guilty. Some have physical signs of stress such as headache, upset stomach or feeling shaky. You also may cry a lot or have trouble sleeping. These feelings are normal. You can easily become exhausted from the stress. Remember that you need to take care of yourself if you are to be of help to your loved one.

Here are some suggestions to help you cope:

- Get as much rest as possible.
- Eat healthy meals. If you cannot eat a full meal, at least eat something.
- Take breaks from the waiting area by going for walks. Let the volunteer or the nurse know where you are going and when you will be back.
- Ask for help from friends, ministers and hospital support services. They may not know how to help you. Tell them what would be helpful for you, such as sitting with you in the waiting room, making dinner or taking in your mail.
- Talk with others about your feelings.
- Try reading, watching television or exercising to distract you and help you relax.
- Make time to take care of matters at home or work. Taking care of these matters means you will have less to worry about.
- Read the written materials given to you by staff. Ask questions if there is information you do not understand.

ICU Health Care Team

- **Doctors**

  The Ohio State University Medical Center is a teaching hospital. A team of doctors is assigned to care for each patient. The team, called a service, is assigned according to the patient's special needs at the time of admission. As the patient's needs change, the team also may change. Each team is made up of several doctors with different titles.

  - The doctor in charge of the patient's care is called the **attending doctor** or the attending physician. Many attending doctors in the ICU have special training in caring for the very ill or injured.
- **Interns and residents** are doctors who are training to be specialists. Interns and residents are called house officers or house staff. The house officer can call the attending doctor at any time to discuss the care of the patient.

- Some teams also may include a **fellow**. A fellow is an experienced doctor who has completed intern and resident training and works in a specific area of medicine.

- **Medical students** are studying and training to be doctors.

- **Nurses**
  - Nurses plan and coordinate patient care. ICU nurses at The Ohio State University Medical Center have special education and skills. They monitor patients closely and provide care.
  - A nurse manager oversees the daily activities of the ICU.
  - A clinical nurse specialist (CNS) has extra education and experience. The CNS helps the PCRM (patient care resource manager), patients and families with patient concerns.

- **Patient Care Resource Managers (PCRM)** (293-8141) and **Social Workers** (293-8427) help with concerns about insurance and money and can help with lodging if needed. They coordinate home care and discharge planning and provide support and counseling.

- **Chaplains** (293-8791) can call your pastor or minister and talk, listen and pray with you and your family.

- **Respiratory therapists** provide treatments to help the patient to breathe easier. They also make sure breathing equipment is working properly.

- **Occupational and Physical Therapists** help with body positioning, range of motion and other exercises to arms, hands, legs and feet. They also help patients to walk and gain strength.

- **Dietitians** check nutrition needs and make suggestions to the health care team.

- **Pharmacists** dispense and check patient medicines and check for drug interactions.

- **Patient Care Associates (PCAs)** help with personal hygiene, turning, and bathing patients. They help the nurse take the patient to tests or procedures and check temperatures, blood pressures and other vital signs.
- **Unit Clerical Coordinator (UCC)** is also called the unit secretary. The UCC will answer the phone and may answer the patient's call light. They also do a variety of clerical tasks to help the health care team with patient care.

- **Volunteers** may be present during the day to offer a helping hand. Volunteers are trained by Volunteer Services to give directions to places in the hospital and help with parking, transportation or lodging problems.

  Please ask the Volunteer for help. They want to help you and are more than willing to listen and offer a strong shoulder to lean on.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.