



Leumit 

PALLIATIVE MEDICINE

BY DR. SIMCHA SHAPIRO

Diseases like heart failure, chronic lung disease, chronic kidney disease, cancer, and muscle wasting diseases, take an enormous burden on both the people suffering from the illnesses, and their families. Life changes forever. People may not be able to do the activities that they once loved, may be more and more dependent on others, and may have many uncontrolled symptoms. While treatments may help to control the illness, the treatments themselves may cause many bothersome symptoms, and further inhibit one's ability to "just live life".

Palliative Medicine is an area of medicine dedicated to helping people who live with chronic, incurable illnesses, to have the best quality of life they can given the reality of their illness. While there are many specialties in medicine which deal specifically with managing various diseases, palliative medicine deals with the *experience* of the person who lives with the disease, trying to improve their day-to-day experience.

SO, HOW DOES PALLIATIVE MEDICINE HELP? First, and foremost, it helps by putting patients and what's important to them, at the center of their care. Sometimes, simple adjustments can make all the difference. A change in scheduling may help a young mother to be able to spend quality time with her children, at the times of day when she has the most energy. An adjustment in medications may allow a Rosh Kollel to be able to focus better and awake time to learn and teach Torah. The addition of a new medicine may help a grandfather with chronic heart failure, to be able to take a walk with his granddaughter.

WHY HAVEN'T I HEARD ABOUT PALLIATIVE MEDICINE UNTIL NOW? As a specialty, palliative medicine is relatively young. In Israel,

there is a new national program under the initiative of the health ministry, to help more people have access to palliative medicine services. Every health fund and every hospital in Israel today, have palliative medicine programs.

IS PALLIATIVE MEDICINE THE SAME AS HOSPICE?

No. Hospice is a type of palliative medicine that is geared specifically to help people have the best quality of life possible, in the final months of their life. Palliative Medicine is not, however limited to end-of-life care. A Palliative Medicine specialist can help ease the burden of illness even in the earlier, when one may have many years of life ahead of them.

With all this talk of "managing symptoms", does going to a Palliative Medicine doctor mean I have to stop actively treating my illness? Not at all! Palliative Medicine can be used along with disease managing or curing treatments. It is not either/or. In fact, some studies have shown that not only do patients receiving palliative medicine live better, but they live longer.

HOW DO I FIND A PALLIATIVE MEDICINE SPECIALIST?

Ask your family doctor or internist. If your health fund does not have a Palliative Medicine clinic near you, you can ask for a referral to a specialist in a near-by hospital.

Dr. Simcha Shapiro practices Family Medicine, and is the director of the department of Palliative Medicine for the Leumit health fund. He was honored to have sat on the committee which drafted the recommendations for the national Palliative Medicine program. He works in the Beit Shemesh area.