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## WHAT YOUR PATIENT IS THINKING

### Please explain the seriousness of the situation

Freddie Stening shares the challenges he faced while coming to terms with his wife's unexpected death

Freddie Stening

Georgina, my wife of 57 years, passed away in January 2024. Her death came as a big shock to the family as until two days prior we were told she should recover from what we believed was infection related delirium. Only a few months before, my wife had been very active, playing badminton, doing pilates, walking, swimming, and was cognitively very alert.

First, she had symptoms of a urinary tract infection, then later infections of the chest and bowel. Several rounds of antibiotics didn't help, and everyone kept telling us that she would get better. Doctors seemed optimistic. We never imagined the progressive physical and mental decline she would experience over the coming weeks. Our family was devastated and shocked when she passed away so quickly. We were left with so many questions.

Georgina's condition, paraneoplastic syndrome, was rapidly progressive and very debilitating. It was mentioned for the first time as a potential cause of her symptoms only the day before she passed. Since losing her, we have struggled to find information or support for families of people with the condition.

#### Importance of a conversation

When Georgina was in hospital she was well cared for. As a family we felt informed of the care and tests she was having. The hospital team was very supportive, giving us time every day to speak with them. However, only the day before Georgina passed, we found ourselves meeting with the palliative care team and learning for the first time the seriousness of her condition.

It would have been helpful also to meet with the healthcare team after Georgina passed, to discuss what happened and to address our unanswered questions.

Being unable to piece together what led to Georgina's death has made our journey in processing our loss much more challenging. We had very little time or information to understand what to expect, which meant we were unable to prepare. I wish the health professionals we saw had been able to explain what they thought was happening at the time. Knowing that her condition was potentially irreversible and even terminal may have helped us prepare for her passing.

#### What you need to know

- Losing a loved one suddenly and unexpectedly may leave family and friends with questions
- Having so many unanswered questions can make grief harder to process
- Families benefit from knowing how serious a condition could become, even when diagnosis and treatment are uncertain

#### Education in practice

- How could you help ensure that families of a patient are informed about the seriousness of their symptoms or condition?
- How could you helpfully share information about the condition a patient has died from with family or loved ones?

Competing interests: none.