

# How do Palliative Care Social Workers model

## and apply the concept of 'safe uncertainty'?

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### Background

Research suggests that the poor management of uncertainty in palliative care can significantly impact patient outcomes<sup>1</sup> as well as the experience of bereaved families<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, it has also been argued that the ability to tolerate and work with uncertainty is a defining feature of the social work role<sup>3</sup>. In some therapeutic and social work settings, the concept of 'safe uncertainty' is used as a simple framework for better supporting service users and their families<sup>4</sup>.

### Aims

- To review the literature around 'uncertainty' in palliative care social work.
- To understand the perspectives of palliative care social workers, drawing on their experiences of dealing with uncertainty.
  - Do they confidently hold positions of 'safe uncertainty' with patients and families?
  - What are the benefits of doing so?
  - Why is the pull of 'safe certainty' so strong and how can we overcome this as professionals?

### Methods

A mixed methods approach (May –August 2023):

- Literature review.
- Focus group to explore shared views and experiences of palliative care social workers (n=5).
- Reflexive thematic analysis<sup>5</sup> used to identify themes and patterns.

### The concept of 'safe uncertainty'<sup>4</sup>

Patients/families often feel they are in one of two 'unsafe' positions when they first access services

**Unsafe uncertainty:**  
Hopeless, having a problem and feeling there is no solution

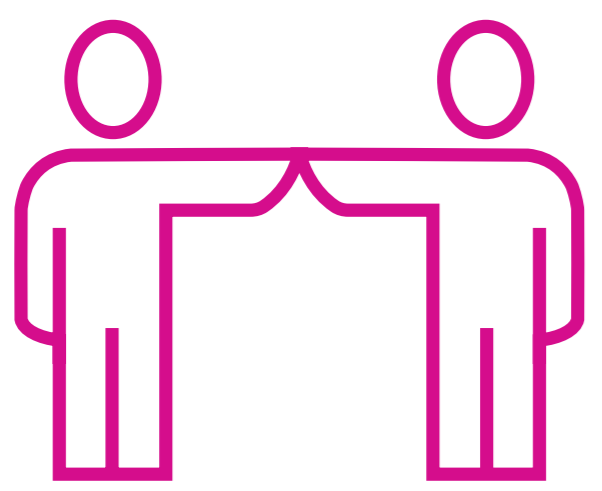
**Unsafe certainty:**  
Having a problem but being clear what is causing it and what will solve it

Professionals can lead patients/families to a position of safety – but which type is best?

**Safe uncertainty:**  
Multiple explanations for the problem and solution; a constant state of flow and exploration

**Safe certainty:**  
Believing that the problem can be solved or is solvable; that risk can be eradicated.

'Safe uncertainty' is not a technique or skill but an ever-evolving state of being. It is consistent with professional values of 'never understanding too quickly', 'respectful curiosity', and the recognition that good social work is a mutually influencing process. Unlike 'safe certainty', it doesn't assume that a problem can be solved or is solvable, opening up space for other views to be stated and heard.



### Focus Group Questions

1. Considering the concepts of certainty and uncertainty in the context of end-of-life (EOL) decision-making, which:
  - a) leads to more paralysis? b) leads to more creativity?
2. Is it possible to embrace professional uncertainty without losing ownership of our own expertise?
3. As Palliative Care Social Workers, how does it feel to model and apply the concept of 'safe uncertainty'?

"Using the words 'safe uncertainty' allows us to quantify more fully what we actually do. Naming it can be the start of a dialogue, the beginning of a conversation that needs to be had".

"I think the way we maintain ownership of our expertise is by saying –'I know it's uncertain, but I can talk to you about my experience, what may happen'. It makes me think of social workers as a safe pair of hands – somebody who has seen this before, is open to it, and is not afraid".

"We are able to effectively work with uncertainty because of our social work training: the skills, values & knowledge embedded in us. We know about attachment, human development, crisis management. We use these to guide and support people, to understand their social histories and the relationships that have brought them to this point."

### Results: Key Themes

- Our current best practice aligns with the concept of 'safe uncertainty'.
- Our training is grounded in theories highly applicable to EOL uncertainty.
- Our level of comfort with 'not knowing' can be reassuring to others.
- Our approach can empower people to think more creatively.
- Our expertise helps us identify and address uncertainties at EOL.
- Our support can help ground people in the midst of the unknown.

"Normalising uncertainty – telling people 'it's ok not to know' – can actually bring a lot of comfort and reassurance. Not just to patients, but the team as well. I think they feel more safe once they've shared their uncertainty with us".

"Safe certainty is actually disempowering. To empower people you have to sit alongside them in the chaos, give them the tools to build their own resilience and come up with creative pathways rather than rigid solutions".

"Doubt, it seems to me, is the central condition of a human being in the 20th century. One of the things... is to learn how certainty crumbles in your hand. We cannot any longer have a fixed view of anything – the table that we're sitting next to, the ground beneath our feet, the laws of science, are full of doubt now".

–Salmon Rushdie, 1988

### Conclusion

Palliative Care Social Workers frequently model and apply 'safe uncertainty' with patients, families, and other professionals; it is an accurate description of the unique contribution they can bring to end-of-life care. Explicitly naming and embracing the concept not only helps them to practice effectively, but supports their own sense of value and identity.

### What next?

We are already incorporating the concept of safe uncertainty into our clinical and peer supervisions. The next step will be to share our insights with the wider social work community.

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