



Information Sheet 1: Patterns of illness in different types of diseases

People with severe or chronic disease and their loved ones will often want to know what the future holds for them. They may have questions such as “How long do I have to live?” “Will I be sick for a long time before I die?” “What will things be like for me towards the end?”

While it is not possible to tell with certainty how long each individual person has to live, there are some patterns of illness that may give patients and their loved ones some ideas about how the future may look. These patterns are called disease trajectories and a common framework describes four trajectories, as outlined below.

An important aspect of this model is the concept of level of functioning, which ranges from high to low. Someone with a high level of functioning is generally mobile and can look after their own personal and social needs. On the other extreme, someone with a low level of functioning is restricted in their mobility and requires help from others to fulfil their personal and social needs.

Sudden death

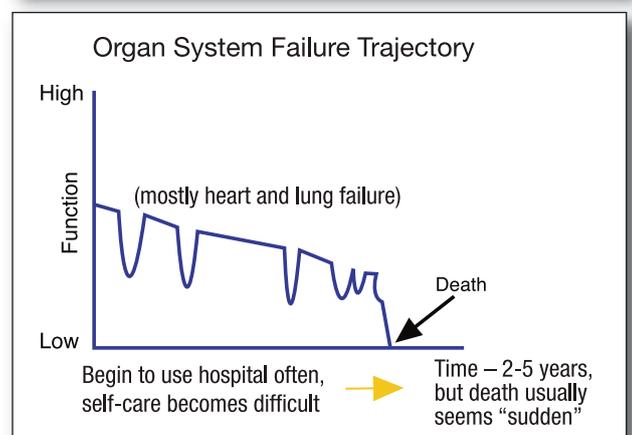
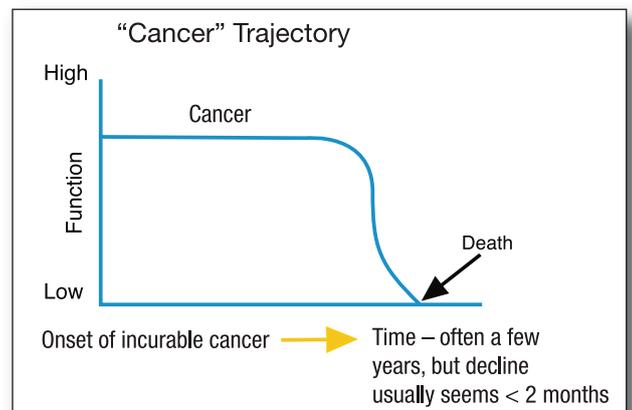
This happens when there has been little warning and no regular contact with the health system leading up to death. The person may go from normal functioning to death following a short, acute episode of illness.

Terminal illness

This is most typical with cancer patients. Their level of functioning may remain high for a long time and then have a sudden dip and a short time (several months) before death. This group uses extensive health services, such as palliative care, for a relatively short period at the end-of-life.

Organ failure

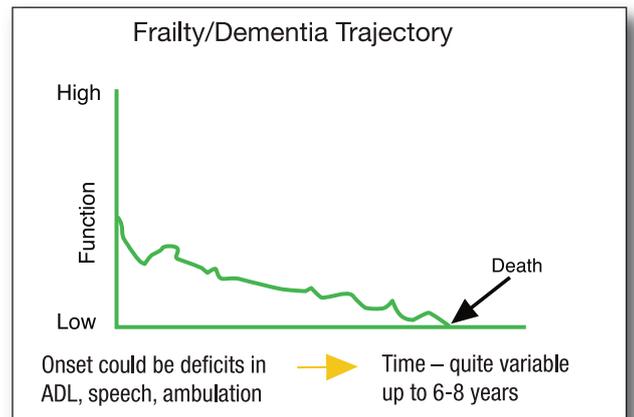
This pattern is typical of patients with a serious and eventually fatal chronic disease such as heart, lung or kidney disease. The pattern will be a number of acute episodes of illness that will often require time in hospital and respond to treatment. While the patient recovers from each of these episodes, they tend to not recover to their previous level, so there is a gradual overall decline in functioning. Death may come suddenly in the end as a consequence of an acute episode that the person does not have the reserve to recover from.





Frailty

This pattern is typical of people of advanced age with general frailty, and progressive conditions like dementia. The pattern starts off with a low level of functioning and has a slow gradual decline. They progress to a low level of functioning and may need assistance in all their personal and social care needs, leading to a reduced quality of life over an extended period of time. Such patients may be in residential aged care facilities. The time of death is unpredictable and tends to be drawn out.



References: Lunney, J.R., Lynn, J & Hogan, C. (2002). Profiles of older Medicare decedents. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 50: 1108-1112.

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