

Talking with your MS patients about difficult topics



Talking About Progressive Disease

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The MS Society of Canada wishes to acknowledge and thank the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's Professional Resource Center for this series:

The National MS Society's Professional Resource Center (PRC) is a resource for clinicians, offering professional publications, clinical consultations, and literature search services, as well as information on health insurance issues, long-term care options, and the development of MS specialty clinics. Physicians are invited to consult via email with MS specialist colleagues at MD_info@nmss.org. Allied health professionals are invited to consult via email with MS specialist colleagues at healthprof_info@nmss.org.

Rosalind Kalb, PhD, (Series Editor) is Director of the Professional Resource Center at the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in New York City, developing and providing educational materials and services for healthcare professionals. As a clinical psychologist in private practice, Dr. Kalb has provided individual and family therapy for people with MS and their families for more than 25 years. She has authored or edited a number of publications about multiple sclerosis. She is the author of the *Knowledge is Power* series for individuals newly diagnosed with MS and co-author, with Nicholas LaRocca, PhD, of *Multiple Sclerosis: Understanding the Cognitive Challenges*, published in 2006. Dr. Kalb has edited two books – *Multiple Sclerosis: The Questions you Have; The Answers you Need* (3rd ed.), published in 2004, and *Multiple Sclerosis: A Guide for Families* (3rd ed.), published in 2006.

Series Editor: Dr. Rosalind Kalb

Canadian adaptation and editing: Nadia Pestrak

Further acknowledgements: Thanks to Cindy DesGrosseilliers, Deanna Groetzinger, Julie Katona, Dr. William J. McIlroy, Diane Rivard and Jon Temme for their contributions.

Design and Publishing: Headcan, Health Education Media

Printing: China

Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, 2006
Legal deposit –
National Library of Canada

Talking about Progressive Disease

By Aaron Miller, MD

An Endorsement from Mark Freedman, HBSc, MSc, MD, CSPQ, FAAN, FRCPC

“Multiple Sclerosis is a complex illness with diverse possible symptoms and a variable course of disease. This publication, together with the others in this new series, will assist health professionals in not only recognizing the need to address these delicate subjects with patients, but also in finding the right words. It is difficult to approach a topic such as “progressive MS” with patients without instilling a sense of despair. This publication will help in maintaining a real sense of hope. Both health professionals and ultimately patients will benefit from this excellent resource produced by the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada.”

About the Endorser

Dr. Freedman is currently professor of medicine in the field of neurology at the University of Ottawa, as well as director of the Multiple Sclerosis Research Unit at the Ottawa Hospital, General Campus. A graduate of the University of Toronto, Dr. Freedman holds his Masters Degree in Molecular Neurochemistry and continued his postgraduate work specializing in neurology after medical school. His postgraduate specialization took him to Queen Square in London, England as well as the Montreal Neurological Institute. He holds his specialist certification in Quebec (CSPQ) and all of Canada (FRCPC) and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology (FAAN).

Dr. Freedman has published over 175 pieces, including abstracts, articles, a book and book chapters and has been invited to give hundreds of lectures and presentations nationally and internationally. His extensive research includes the area of molecular biochemistry, molecular neurochemistry, clinical biochemistry and immunology. He is currently holding peer reviewed and industry related funding for translational research investigating immune mechanisms of damage in multiple sclerosis, with particular interest in the role of gamma-delta T-cells. He is also the lead investigator in the Canadian Bone Marrow Transplant Study in MS.

Dr. Freedman has almost 20 years of experience in the management of patients with multiple sclerosis and has been the principal investigator on more than a dozen clinical trials with new therapeutic agents for MS. He is also active on several national and provincial committees of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada and the National MS Society (U.S.A.).

About the Author

Aaron Miller, MD

Dr. Miller graduated from Brandeis University in 1964 and received his MD degree from New York University School of Medicine in 1968. Following his residency in neurology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, he received additional postdoctoral training in neurovirology and immunology at the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health and at Einstein. In March, 2004, Dr. Miller assumed the position of Medical Director of the Corinne Goldsmith Dickinson Center for Multiple Sclerosis at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine. For 23 years prior to that, he headed the Division of Neurology at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, NY where he continues to serve as co-director of the MS Care Center. Dr. Miller is also a Professor of Neurology at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

Dr. Miller is chief medical officer and chairman of the Medical Advisory Board of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. He formerly served as president of the Consortium of MS Centers and was the first chairman of the Multiple Sclerosis section of the American Academy of Neurology. Dr. Miller has participated in numerous clinical trials of new treatments for MS and has recently authored a book, *Multiple Sclerosis in Clinical Practice*, with colleagues Fred Lublin and Patricia Coyle. He has also published many articles and chapters on MS and other neurologic subjects.

Dr. Miller is very active with the American Academy of Neurology. He developed a popular seminar entitled *MS: Patient Management*, and for the past four years has directed a course entitled *Update on Multiple Sclerosis*. He currently serves as editor of *Continuum*, the Academy's bi-monthly continuing education publication. From 1997–2003, he served as co-chairman of the Education Committee and Chairman of the Annual Meeting Subcommittee. Prior to assuming that position, he served as chairman of the Program Accreditation and Development Subcommittee.

Talking about Progressive Disease

Introduction

This booklet is designed to facilitate conversations with your multiple sclerosis patients about disease progression. Like the other topics in this series, progressive disease is one that patients and their physicians often have difficulty discussing – the patients because they do not know what questions to ask and fear the answers they might receive, and the doctors because it can be difficult to discuss problems for which there are no definitive answers.

1. How and when should I talk to a patient about disease progression?

- Beginning fairly early in the disease course, patients need accurate information about the natural history of MS. While the disease-modifying agents slow disease progression for many people, the disease course tends to become progressive at some point along the way – though generally not for quite a few years. Although a transition to progressive disease is expected, normal disease fluctuations can make it difficult to pinpoint when the transition actually occurs. Transient worsening that is not associated with an attack should not be immediately interpreted as a sign of transition; it often takes several visits over 6 months to a year to be confident that the course has truly become progressive.
- Accurate information about the disease encourages people with MS and their families to develop realistic expectations and plan for the worst even while hoping for the best. This kind of planning gives them time to develop the financial safety net they will need in the event that the disease becomes more disabling. Accurate information also reduces people's feelings of failure and self-blame if and when the disease progresses in spite of your and their best efforts.
- Patients generally respond well to this information when reassured that most people with MS do not become severely disabled, and that you will be working with them to manage their disease and treat their symptoms.

- Patients with progressive disease from onset need to know that while there are fewer approved treatment options available for them than for those with relapsing MS, there is still much that they can do to live comfortably with the disease. With the recent emphasis on early intervention for relapsing forms of the disease, these patients often feel neglected by the scientific community and by their doctors. They need to understand the importance of symptomatic treatments and of rehabilitation interventions designed to help them maintain and enhance function, comfort, and wellness, and reduce the risk of unnecessary complications.
- Patients with relapsing disease who begin or continue to progress significantly in spite of disease-modifying therapies, need to understand that the disease sometimes takes this course, in spite of everyone's best efforts. It is important to discuss additional treatment options at this time (e.g., mitoxantrone or one of the other chemotherapies) so that patients and families understand that treatment is available, and that you are not "giving up on them".

2. How much is the "right" amount of information to give my patient?

- Although "one size" will never fit all, it is important to provide patients with the information they need to participate actively in their care and make informed treatment and lifestyle decisions. The challenge lies in providing the information in ways that meet different people's learning styles and emotional needs. Some may want or need to have as much information as you can give them right away, while others will need to hear it more gradually.
- Patients need to know that the prognosis for a person with MS is never certain, but that progressive MS can have a significant impact on virtually every aspect of everyday life. Let them know that the goal of your MS management strategies is to minimize that impact as much as possible with:

- Disease-modifying treatment
- Aggressive symptom management
- Rehabilitation to maintain function
- Adaptive devices to conserve energy and promote safety
- Careful attention to their overall health and wellness
- Referrals to community resources for education, support, services
- Referrals to counselling, if needed
- Treatments for progressive disease generally carry with them a certain number of risks, with no guarantee of benefit. A thorough review of the anticipated benefits and risks will facilitate patients' decision-making and promote adherence once the treatment has been determined.
- Alert patients with progressive disease and their family members to the potential impact of MS on employment, and emphasize the need for sound financial planning. The MS Society of Canada can provide information and referrals with regards to employment and income supports.

3. How can I convey this information in a way that will avoid feelings of failure and guilt?

- Emphasize that the natural history of MS in many but not all patients is for it to gradually become more progressive. It is important to reassure the person that progression is not a sign of failure or weakness.
- Explain that the transition to progressive disease refers to the continued worsening they experience even in the absence of acute exacerbations and does not necessarily mean a transition to severe disability.
- Patients need to know that the symptoms of MS can often be managed effectively, even when they are becoming more severe.
- The most important message for patients is that you will be working with them to manage their symptoms and help them live comfortably with their MS, regardless of disease course or severity.

4. How do I find a balance between providing realistic, accurate information about disease progression and fostering hope and optimism?

- Realistic information does not have to preclude hope. Patients' hope and optimism for the future come from several sources:
 - Feeling informed helps people feel more in control.
 - Having options from which to choose helps people feel empowered.
 - Being prepared for a range of eventualities helps people feel less vulnerable and more in control of their lives.
 - Confidence in your commitment to their ongoing care helps them feel less afraid and more optimistic.
 - Knowing that they will be seeing you on a regular basis helps them feel less alone in their struggle with MS.
 - Knowing that there is always something that can be done to make things better – even if only a little bit – keeps people feeling hopeful.
- Most patients feel better – more optimistic, hopeful, and empowered – when they feel confident that they are hearing the truth from their doctors. They are quick to detect empty reassurances and “false hope”.
- The most effective way to promote optimism and hope is to balance honest, realistic assessments with suggested interventions to address the problems.

5. How can I discuss the importance of rehabilitation (for maintenance rather than recovery purposes) without scaring or discouraging my patients?

- Although patients are initially frightened to hear that MS cannot be cured, or that symptoms like spasticity, weakness, imbalance can be chronic, they respond positively to rehabilitation when the goals are clearly explained:
 - To help them attain the highest possible level of function and comfort given their limitations
 - To help them maintain that level of function as long as possible

- To prevent unnecessary, potentially dangerous complications
- To provide them with the assistive devices they need to carry out their daily activities effectively, safely, and comfortably
- People who are frustrated and discouraged by the lack of a cure for MS respond well to the opportunity to “do something” for themselves. Rehabilitation programs give people the feeling of doing something constructive to help themselves, and provide them with home exercise programs and self-care strategies to use independently or with a care partner.

6. What is the best format for providing information to my patients?

- Discussions about significant disease worsening or changes in treatment strategies should always happen during an office visit.
 - Patients prefer to receive painful news from the doctor directly, rather than to hear it over the phone or have it left for them on an answering machine.
 - Face-to-face conversations give people the opportunity to react and ask questions.
 - Patients feel less frightened and more confident when their doctors discuss things with them openly.
 - Hearing the news from the doctor personally allows patients to decide when and how to share it with other family members, particularly their children. Messages on answering machines can be accessed by anyone.
- The patient may want to bring a family member or friend to the office to act as an “extra pair of ears”. Some of these conversations are stressful enough for patients that they forget much of the information by the time they get home.
- Some patients, particularly those with cognitive symptoms, may need to take notes during their visits, or take home printed materials to read at their leisure.
- Whenever there is a major change in a person’s condition, or a change in the available treatment options, it is helpful to encourage them to go home and think about it and then call you with any questions. You may want to provide written materials or suggest that your patients contact the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada (1-800-268-7582) for booklets or pamphlets relevant to the subjects you have been discussing.

7. How and when should the information be shared with family members?

- Except in the case of severe cognitive impairment, this is left primarily to the patient's discretion.
- Treatment strategies that involve the participation of a significant other (e.g., injections, exercise programs) should eventually be discussed with the patient and partner together. A recommended treatment strategy that the partner does not understand or support, or cannot fulfill, is unlikely to have a successful outcome.
- Interventions that significantly impact the partner (e.g., chemotherapy that might cause sterility; treatment for erectile dysfunction) eventually need to be discussed with both parties.

8. What kinds of emotional reactions can I expect from patients whose disease is progressing in spite of whatever treatments they are receiving?

- Without the appropriate information about the natural history of MS, people may have very strong reactions to the progression:
 - Feelings of guilt that they did not take good enough care of themselves, did not follow your advice to the letter, did not listen to recommendations of their various well-meaning relatives and friends, did not try hard enough
 - Feelings of weakness or inadequacy that they could not "beat this disease"
 - Feelings of resentment that you did not provide them with the "right" advice, treatment, or care
 - Normal and natural feelings of grief over the accumulated losses and changes that the disease brings to their lives.
- Depression, which is very common in MS under the best of circumstances, can occur in response to this additional loss of control.

- During periods of disease progression, people with MS may be particularly vulnerable to the claims of a wide variety of complementary or alternative treatments. They may try these interventions indiscriminately in hopes of finding the elusive cure. They may also believe that treatments sold without prescription are safer or healthier than those that are prescribed – particularly chemotherapies. As many as 60% of people with MS are using complementary or alternative treatments at any given time, and many are not sharing this information with their physicians.

9. What resources are available to educate and support my patients?

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada

- The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada offers educational programs, support groups, and other resources for:
 - Individuals living with a diagnosis of MS
 - Individuals awaiting a diagnosis with respect to MS
 - Individuals close to a person with MS, such as their family and friends
 - Caregivers of a person with MS

In addition to serving its primary clients, Society volunteers and staff also provide information and support to health professionals, employers, institutions and students.

Based upon needs and available resources, the MS Society of Canada's units, chapters, divisions, and national office provide Client Services that encompass:

- Information and referral
- Education
- Support
- Advocacy
- Funding

- The MS Society of Canada has educational materials on a wide range of topics. Your patients can obtain these and other materials free of charge from their local division or chapter (1-800-268-7582) or visit the website at www.mssociety.ca:
 - Living with Progressive MS
 - Living Well with MS: Managing Fatigue
 - Living for Today: Managing MS Pain
 - Living Well with MS: Mind Matters
 - Red Flags & Green Lights: Accessing Reliable Health Information
 - Taking Care: A Travel Guide for your MS Caregiver Journey
 - Taking Care: A Guide for Well Partners
 - Multiple Sclerosis and Your Emotions
 - Solving Cognitive Problems
 - Everybody Stretch
- The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada website (www.mssociety.ca) offers information on a variety of topics related to MS as well as information regarding local services, programs, fundraising events and much more.

MS Clinics

- The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada is proud to work with a network of specialized MS clinics across the country. Clinic services vary, but most offer a wide range of services, delivered by a multi-disciplinary health care team. Visit our website (www.mssociety.ca) for a list of MS clinics across Canada.

Additional Recommended Websites:

- The National Multiple Sclerosis Society (U.S.A.) website (www.nationalmssociety.org) offers information and interactive programming on a wide variety of topics (e.g., disease-modifying therapies, symptom management, research)
- The Multiple Sclerosis International Federation/The World of Multiple Sclerosis www.msif.org
- CenterWatch Clinical Trials Listing Service™ www.centerwatch.com
- National Institutes of Health (NIH) Clinical Trials Listing Service www.clinicaltrials.gov
- Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Centers www.ms-care.org

Pharmaceutical Company Support Programs:

Betaseron (Berlex)

MSPathways

1-800-977-2770

www.ms-pathways.ca

Avonex (Biogen)

MS Alliance

1-888-456-2263

www.msalliance.com

Copaxone (Teva Neuroscience)

Shared Solutions

1-800-283-0034

www.mswatch.ca

Rebif (Serono Canada)

Multiple Support Program

1-888-677-3243

www.serono-canada.com

Recommended Reading:

- Coyle PK, Halper J. **Meeting the Challenges of Progressive Multiple Sclerosis**. New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2001.
- Holland N, Halper J. (eds.). **Multiple Sclerosis: A Self-Care Guide to Wellness** (2nd ed.). New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2005.
- Kalb R (ed.). **Multiple Sclerosis: The Questions You Have; The Answers You Need** (3rd ed.). New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2004.
- Schapiro RT. **Managing the Symptoms of Multiple Sclerosis** (4th ed.). New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2003.

Other Booklets in this Series:

Talking about the Diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis

Barbara Giesser, MD

Talking about Depression and Other Emotional Changes

Sarah Minden, MD

Talking about Elimination Problems

Nancy Holland, EdD

Talking about Sexual Dysfunction

Frederick Foley, PhD

Talking about Cognitive Dysfunction

Nicholas LaRocca, PhD

How to Reach the MS Society

Current as of January, 2006

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OUR MISSION

To be a leader in finding a cure for multiple sclerosis and enabling people affected by MS to enhance their quality of life

Contact the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada

Toll-free in Canada: 1-800-268-7582

Email: info@mssociety.ca

Website: www.mssociety.ca

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Design: Headcan™, Health Education Media, www.headcan.com, Toronto, Canada.

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