

### Working with Collusion – promoting openness

Collusion creates problems for both the colluder and the person being colluded against. The person 'being kept in the dark' can suffer from feelings of isolation often resulting in depression. The surviving relatives and/or friends run the risk of suffering from difficulties in mourning or abnormal grief due to the breakdown of closeness; the feelings that have been left unexpressed, the worry about concerns which were not addressed and the lack of ability to say goodbye. The strain on the colluder during the collusion can be immense and lead to symptoms of clinical anxiety or depression.

#### Stage 1: Talking with the relative responsible for the collusion

##### Eliciting 'The cost'

- ◆ Focus on the colluder and check how they are managing day to day.
- ◆ Be alert to any cues about the emotional strain that they may be experiencing, because of the collusion and explore them.
- ◆ Follow up these cues by establishing the amount of strain, and how it is affecting the colluder day to day

**NB** Remember they will try to avoid answering your questions or will minimise what is happening. This is because of the ambivalence they feel. Part of them is aware that their relative is seriously ill, and will die. The other part wishes to avoid facing this, and wants to maintain the pretence.

- ◆ Check if the collusion is having any **effect on the relationship** with the partner. This will usually reveal that it is driving a wedge between them as they are unable to talk to each other, and this makes the colluder feel very sad.

##### Understanding 'The reasons'

- ◆ Explore why the colluder believes collusion is in their relative's interest, and establish how strong these beliefs are.
- ◆ Accept that these reasons are legitimate. Do not challenge their validity.

##### Presenting 'The contract'

- ◆ Summarise the 'costs' to the colluder, and ask if they are therefore willing to consider letting you talk to the relative to check their awareness.
- ◆ Make a contract that this is all you will do. You will not tell the relative the truth, if he or she has no clear awareness of the predicament.
- ◆ Negotiate to tell the patient that the colluder knows the full situation
- ◆ Accept the colluders ambivalence, but negotiate to check that he or she is willing for you to go ahead.

### Stage 2: Talking to the Patient

When talking to the patient make sure that you stick to your contract with the colluder. Your role is to establish the patients understanding and respond to information needs if, and only if the patient wants information

Therefore:

- ◆ Check the patient view of the situation, what is going on in relation to their illness, and how they interpret what has happened so far
- ◆ Check how the patient has been left feeling by what has happened.
- ◆ Find out **why** the patient has not asked questions of the colluder, and what they think the colluder knows about the situation
- ◆ If necessary tell the patient that the colluder knows the full story
- ◆ Check if they are willing to go ahead and talk with their partner.

### Stage 3: Seeing the couple together

This could be an emotional and difficult interview. It is important to facilitate the meeting initially, as to date the couple have found it difficult to face each other knowing the full picture.

- ◆ Recap the situation, pause, and acknowledge their distress. Give space for tears and for the couple to talk to each other.
- ◆ Check if both parties are would be willing to talk about the resulting issues or concerns BUT offer to given them space to be left alone?

If they choose to talk things through

- ◆ Encourage the couple to identify their concerns
- ◆ Take each concern in turn and discuss how it might be dealt with.
- ◆ Screen for other concerns and encourage the couple to think a positive goal. If they are able to do this, then reinforce it!
- ◆ If no such goal is put forward ask:
  - *"Are there any important things you would still like to do/achieve?"*