

Key Points – Clare White, Consultant in Palliative Medicine

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Why Specialist Palliative Care (SPC) Is Needed:

- Generalist care can manage straightforward palliative needs.
- SPC is essential for complex symptoms like intractable pain, severe breathlessness, vomiting, anxiety, etc.
- SPC teams provide expert symptom control and holistic care.

Need for Inpatient Units (Specialist Palliative Care Units - SPCUs):

- Some symptoms cannot be managed in community or general hospitals.
- SPCUs offer intensive multidisciplinary support and complex medication regimes.
- Aim to stabilise and discharge when possible; some patients remain until end of life due to complexity.
- Not Just for the Elderly - Many patients are young, including parents of young children.
- SPC helps restore quality of life even near end of life.

Impact of SPC:

- Transforms patients from suffering to comfort and clarity.
- Allows meaningful time with loved ones and dignified death.
- Supports healthier bereavement experiences for families.
- Biggest Patient Fear: Fear of dying badly (pain, distress, suffocation).
- SPC reassures this can be avoided with proper care.

Evidence Base:

- Decades of research show SPC improves quality of life, reduces hospital admissions, and supports carers.
- Works best when introduced early.

Challenges in NI:

- Funding: SPC heavily reliant on charity—unlike other medical specialities like cardiology.
- Bed Pressures: Waiting lists common; discharges needed to accommodate urgent admissions.
- Continuity of Care: Lack of access to ENCOMPASS system causes communication breakdowns.
- Advance Care Planning: Lack of regional DNACPR and RESPECT forms hampers patient-centred care.
- Systemic Barriers: Limited community support and medication access affect 24/7 care delivery.

Conclusion:

- SPCU is vital for those with most complex needs.
- Proper NHS funding and system integration essential.
- Open invitation to visit Northern Ireland Hospice and hear directly from patients about its impact.