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MARRIED JUST IN TIME: DEATHBED WEDDINGS, MEANING AND MAGIC

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BACKGROUND:

Brave conversations in hospital, often facilitated by the palliative care team, lead to a discovery of what really matters if time is short.

Getting married turned out to be high on the agenda for many couples where one partner is facing mortality. There has been little exploration of romance and marriage in the context of advanced illness

METHOD:

Seven deathbed weddings in a tertiary cancer centre were analysed. These had taken place over a period of 2 years. Initial conversations, subsequent arrangements, the impact on the couple, and the subsequent reactions in bereavement were explored. Demographics, illness details, reasons for the marriage and logistics of the wedding were recorded. Bereaved spouses were subsequently interviewed about the meaning of the wedding.

RESULTS:

6/7 weddings were identified as 'goals' by the palliative care team. On average the time from conversation to wedding was 10 days. 3/7 weddings took place within 1 day of the conversation. Wedding outfits ranged from pyjamas to full white wedding on a hospital ward.

5/7 brides/grooms died in hospital, on average 16 days after the wedding, In terms of meaning, this ranged from legal and financial reasons, to a statement of love and connection

DISCUSSION:

Momentous celebrations distracted patients, relatives and healthcare team from the daily tragedy they were immersed in. The focus became one of healing not curing. Teams were uplifted, symptoms improved.

The stories reinforced the idea that self-esteem and need for connection are dominant forces even in the face of death. ■