



Palliative Care: Compassion in Times of Critical Illness



What is JDC ESHEL?

JDC ESHEL is Israel's social research and development incubator, tasked with developing comprehensive responses to the complex challenges faced by Israeli society with the aging of its population.

JDC ESHEL is the association for the planning and development of services for older adults and their families in Israel. The organization brings together and serves as an "honest-broker" and convenor between government ministries, prominent stakeholders, and professionals involved in the care of older adults. In partnership, these groups work to ensure older adults live independent, satisfactory and dignified lives, while easing the responsibility of care on the family and welfare/health systems. Many of the 1.15 million individuals aged 65+ living in Israel benefit directly and indirectly from a rich variety of services and programs designed and developed by JDC ESHEL.

JDC ESHEL functions under the auspices of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), an American based NGO, which provides relief, rescue and reconstruction services to Jewish and non-Jewish clients around the world.

Click here to view JDC ESHEL's [5-year \(2021-2025\) Strategic Plan for Optimal Aging](#) executive summary and/or [listen to a 15 minute presentation](#) on the strategic plan by JDC ESHEL CEO, Yossi Heymann.



Bringing Meaning and Comfort to those Living the End of Life

The diagnosis of life-threatening illness signals the start of a tumultuous journey for the older adult and their family. This journey will likely bring pain and discomfort, fear and uncertainty, dilemmas, and conflicts. In Israel and globally, medical systems, which are typically focused on *prolonging life*, do not always have the capacity and mindset to *ease suffering* and assist the individual in finding meaning in this period. Doctors typically focus on the fact that a patient is dying, rather than a person is still living!

Despite its proven benefits, palliative care is still an unknown concept to most Israelis, even among medical professionals. Some 50,000 Israelis die each year, almost 80% of them over the age of 65. While most would benefit from palliative care, few receive it. In 2015, only 20% of those who were eligible for palliative care received this service, and even this was in the final weeks of their lives. The problem is twofold: a lack of medical professionals trained in palliative care and a lack of awareness among the public.

In 2017, JDC ESHEL, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, launched a National Initiative to ensure that Israelis of all ages who are contending with life threatening illness receive compassionate pain relief and emotional support from the moment of diagnosis through the end of life. The focus is on Israeli medical professionals and paraprofessionals who are *on the front line* – engaging on a daily and hourly basis with those individuals in dire need during their time of crisis. These medical professionals are being equipped with relevant and current knowledge, expertise and skills, and most importantly, to focus on the fact that the patient is still living, and how to provide the most dignified and meaningful living experience in spite of the challenging circumstances presented by the life threatening illness. Through the Health Ministry and JDC ESHEL's groundbreaking, medical and social service, professionals are taking a broader view of palliative care, increasingly recognizing the need for palliative care to **relieve suffering, enhance dignity and finding meaningful purpose** in cases of any serious illness.

This document will outline our progress to date in building the program.

"I gained fundamental knowledge about the palliative approach and made important connections with other professionals who are providing this type of care. As a social worker, I believe that this formal grounding in palliative care will enable me to better help individuals who are facing serious illness, and their loved ones.

- **Eliezer Rosner**, social worker, Shaare Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem



Instilling a Culture of Palliative Care in Israel

In 2017, the Health Ministry and JDC ESHEL launched the Palliative Care Training Program. The program provides comprehensive courses, knowledge and skills to physicians and nurses, as well as social workers, psychologists, and other professionals and paraprofessionals working with older adults and people with severe illnesses. By increasing the number of professionals with awareness of palliative care throughout the country, the program aims to make palliative care standard practice in Israel. And this, in turn, will reduce the unnecessary suffering that many severely ill Israelis face, as well as relieve some of the stress experienced by their families and caregivers.

Creating a Nationwide Team of Palliative Care Leaders

The concept of palliative care is still relatively new in Israel, and medical institutions that seek to incorporate this approach will need to expand their vision of care for critically ill patients. To facilitate this process, the Health Ministry and JDC ESHEL created a two-year **Leadership Training Program**. This initiative is designed to establish a cadre of change agents who can inspire their colleagues to embrace the palliative care approach.

Since its launch in 2017, the Leadership Training Program has created four cohorts of leaders, with the launch of the fourth cohort in September 2019. Each cohort brings together approximately 75 diverse professionals from hospitals and HMOs throughout the country. Today, this program for leaders and change-makers now encompasses approximately 300 motivated professionals – with an equal proportion of 1. doctors, 2. nurses, 3. social workers and psychologists and 4. other health professionals - from 51 medical institutions that are planning projects to further the palliative care approach in their respective workplaces.

Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, the Palliative Care Leadership Training was active throughout 2020, using virtual platforms when needed.

In November 2020, the Training Center's *fourth* cohort finished its intensive training. This cohort of 77 doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and other health professionals hail from 15 institutions around the country, including hospitals, geriatric centers, and primary health clinics.

“This course was revolutionary. I have never experienced a course like this. It gave us the tools to make lasting change within our organizations. We created tailored plans for our organizations, received support on all levels to implement our plans, and became part of a fantastic professional network that did not exist before.”

~ Dr. Simcha Shapira (1st cohort, family doctor in the Leumit HMO)



Harnessing the knowledge and skills he gained from this program, **Dr. Shapira** convinced the Leumit HMO to invest in advancing palliative care. He now serves as the HMO's Jerusalem Regional Director of Palliative Care. Last year, he spearheaded the establishment of Leumit HMO's first palliative care clinic, focusing on oncology patients, and has organized training in palliative care for 150 Leumit HMO doctors and nurses.

"We created all of this from nothing. When we first started, there wasn't even a computer code for palliative care in our system. Now this exists, and more and more doctors know how to use it. We have become a resource for doctors and nurses who want to consult about their patients."

~ Dr. Simcha Shapira (1st cohort, family doctor in the Leumit HMO)

In support of its Leadership Training Program, in September 2019, JDC ESHEL established the **Mentoring Program** to enable all participants of the Leadership Training Program to receive ongoing guidance after their cohort graduates. The Mentoring Program taps professionals with a strong background in palliative care, and trains them to be mentors to the new graduates. This initiative amplifies the return on investment of the Leadership Training Program and ensures that new Palliative Care Leaders have ongoing professional support as they improve quality of life for Israelis who are facing terminal illness.

Emotional Support for Professionals "in the Trenches" Fighting Illness

The palliative care approach recognizes that ongoing involvement with life-threatening illness also takes a toll on medical professionals. Therefore, the Palliative Care Program is driving projects that bolster their ability to endure in their profession. For example:

Establishment of ethical standards: In situations of critical illness, medical staff grapple with dilemmas, such as when the wishes of an older adult with dementia conflict with those of his/her children. To help professionals make complex decisions, the Palliative Care Program created a document with ethical guidelines for the management of end-of-life situations.

Cultivating a network of peer support to prevent professional burnout: In 2019, the program launched a new effort to train pairs of social workers and nurses to provide support to professionals who work in fields such as oncology. The program seeks to prevent the burnout that is common among professionals who treat patients at the end of life.

2020: Responding to Emerging Needs

In recognition of the emotional toll that the coronavirus pandemic has taken on healthcare professionals, JDC ESHEL held a series of three virtual gatherings (using Zoom technology) for program participants from all cohorts. These meetings provided them with a safe space to share their experiences of dealing with unprecedented levels of death in their daily work.



Additionally, thanks to the growing awareness of the importance of palliative care, several hospitals in Israel found creative ways to enable encounters between patients and their families. For example:

- Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center-Ichilov Hospital reserved several fully protective suits that first-degree relatives of people in the last stages of COVID-19 could wear to make a final bedside visit.
- Sheba Medical Center designed a way for relatives sitting in the hospital courtyard to “visit” their relatives via Zoom and encouraged the use of other communication technologies. The Center also offers a COVID-compliant way for families to view the bodies of their deceased relatives one last time.

Courses for Health Care Professionals

Palliative Care courses for health care professionals are steadily instilling the principles of this approach throughout Israel’s medical system. Courses in 2020 included:

In-person courses in January/February (prior to the coronavirus). Four training courses were held for 110 professionals – doctors, nurses, social workers and psychologists, and health professionals. Each nine-session course imparted palliative knowledge and tools for the professionals to incorporate in their work.

Remote learning courses launched Amidst the coronavirus pandemic, the Palliative Care program opened a series of courses geared to various health professionals, this time using remote learning techniques. Four courses were launched, one for each of the following professional profiles: doctors; nurses; social workers and psychologists; and occupational and physical therapists. Approximately 120 professionals benefited from this round of training. For each course, a WhatsApp group was formed to enable participants to exchange ideas and derive peer support. Moreover, in a new development for 2020, for each course a palliative care expert served as a mentor for the students, helping them cope with challenges and to integrate their new knowledge into their daily work routines.

In light of the success of the remote courses and the strong demand for more, an additional series of four courses will be opened for 1,120 professionals seeking to acquire knowledge in the palliative field.

Circulating Professional Information

At the request of the Ministry of Health, JDC ESHEL is working with the Ministry to raise awareness about palliative care. In 2020, the Health Ministry and JDC ESHEL produced a comprehensive **digital information package** for broad distribution. This package contains three 6-minute films that inform health professionals and family members how to initiate conversations about end-of-



life issues and treatment. Other resources include a dictionary of concepts and links to research on the topic of palliative care.

As a complement to these resources, the Ministry of Health is including a film about Palliative Care as well as circulating detailed instructions on filling out advanced directives¹. The Ministry's direct involvement lends prestige to the digital information package and ensures that it is distributed widely throughout Israel.

The Road Ahead

JDC ESHEL and Israel's Health Ministry continues to advance the field of palliative care in Israel. There is strong demand for professional training courses, as evidenced by the waiting lists for the courses that opened in November 2020. While endeavoring to meet this need, the Palliative Care program also plans to:

- Begin development of a **Community Palliative Care Consultation Center**, to serve clients of all the Health Funds.
- Launch an **awareness campaign** about palliative care, targeting doctors in 110 internal medicine wards in hospitals throughout Israel.
- Develop an **internet site** on palliative care for use by both the public and professionals.
- Consider the possibility of developing palliative care courses to be hosted by each of Israel's four HMOs, in response to their request.

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¹ An advanced directive is a legal document that states a person's wishes about receiving medical care if that person is no longer able to make medical decisions because of a serious illness or injury.

Source: <https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/advance-directive>