Many people come on service with Hospice with multiple medications that may no longer be appropriate. Medications that were prescribed in the past may not be helping anymore as the body changes with time. Some medications may even become harmful. Many people like to take fewer pills and find they feel better when they cut back on the number of pills they take. Just as medications that are good for a newborn need to be adjusted as a child grows, medications at the end of life need to be adjusted as the body changes. This is a guide to help with understanding when some medications may no longer be appropriate.

**Statins** such as Lipitor and Torvast are medications that prevent heart disease by lowering cholesterol levels. There are some studies that indicate cholesterol may be protective at end of life so higher levels might be better! Preventing heart disease that might occur sometime in the distant future is often not appropriate for people who are not likely to live long enough to experience this benefit. Usually these drugs are no longer appropriate.

**Bisphosphonates**, used for prevention of osteoporosis, may not be appropriate for people with limited life expectancy. Preventing osteoporosis sometime in the distant future may not be appropriate for someone who is not likely to live long enough to experience the benefit. In addition it is necessary to sit up for 60 minutes after taking these medications which is challenging or impossible for some people. With the exception of pain relief for people with bone metastasis, bisphosphonates are not usually indicated in hospice patients.

**Vitamins, minerals and other supplements**: Vitamin, mineral, and other supplements have not been shown to improve survival or quality of life. They often just add to the number of pills to remember and swallow which is sometimes overwhelming for the person taking all the pills or their caregivers.

**Warfarin also known as Coumadin** is used to prevent blot clots from forming. The levels are measured with blood checks from time to time. Near the end of life, the levels often fluctuate a lot because the body is changing. This can increase the risk of having bleeding. Also as people are older and more frail, they often have weakness and falls. Taking warfarin or Coumadin increases the risk of bleeding more than normal if a person falls and injures themselves.

**Megesterol** (Megace) may improve appetite and weight gain at times. If it is going to work, it usually works within a week to increase appetite and several weeks to increase weight in about 1 in 4 people who take this medicine. There is no evidence of improved quality of life or survival, and the use of megesterol is associated with increased incidence of blood clots.
Dementia Medicines (ie. Cholinesterase Inhibitors like Aricept and NMAD receptor antagonists like Amantadine & Memantine): Since Dementia medicines are indicated for mild to moderate dementia, they are not likely to be beneficial for most people with end stage dementia. They have been shown to help people with moderate dementia to stay independent longer. Once someone comes to hospice because of their dementia, they are not usually independent anymore. Plus dementia medications can cause sleepiness and dizziness, among other side effects.

Insulin and oral hypoglycemic agents: When a person probably has a few weeks or months left to live, the goals for managing blood sugars in diabetes change. It is no longer important to keep blood sugars very low in order to prevent long term side effects of high blood sugar. Many people find checking blood sugars to be uncomfortable. As a person’s appetite changes and they are not eating as much, which is very common for people as the end of life gets near, target blood sugar range is shifted up slightly. In this situation, the medical team is more worried about low blood sugars than high blood sugars.

References
Descriptive evaluation of warfarin use in patients receiving hospice or palliative care. Journal of Palliative Medicine 12(1) 83-87 2009 Jan (stopping warfarin is not that bad!!).