

## A Critical Analysis of Fatal Signs (Arishta Lakshanas) and Prognostic Indicators in Ayurveda Compared to Modern Palliative Care

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### Abstract

Prognostic assessment plays a crucial role in medical practice by guiding therapeutic decisions, ethical considerations, and end-of-life care planning. Within Ayurveda, a system called Arishta Lakshana offers detailed warning signals - bodily changes, behaviors, or sensations - that suggest disease cannot be cured or death draws close. Ancient writings including the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Bhela Samhita, and Ashtanga Samgraha record these signs using inputs from sight, sound, smell, touch, and mental state. Today's hospice approaches also depend on clues like irregular breathing, skin patterns, confusion at journey's end, and failing organs to detect when someone is dying.

Several contemporary prognostic indicators demonstrate notable conceptual parallels with traditional Ayurvedic descriptions. Close study shows many similarities between old Ayurvedic markers and today's clinical findings during final stages of illness. While examining this overlap, the discussion touches upon moral questions tied to predicting outcomes, how traditional knowledge could fit within supportive care models, and whether evaluating the five senses - Panchendriya Pariksha - holds value now.

**Keywords:** Arishta Lakshana, Ayurveda, Prognosis, Palliative Care, Panchendriya Pariksha, End-of-Life Care, Prognostic Indicators.

## Introduction

Long seen as a core part of medical practice - alongside diagnosing illness and managing therapy - forecasting patient outcomes holds lasting importance. Knowing likely disease progression allows doctors to shape care aims, adjust interventions, distribute hospital supplies more wisely, and support honest discussions with loved ones. Tools like the Palliative Prognostic Index (PPI) and Palliative Performance Scale (PPS), backed by research, now join blood tests, scans, and body function scores in shaping these forecasts. Increasing dependence on laboratory investigations and technological diagnostics has comparatively reduced emphasis on bedside clinical observation.

Unlike others, Ayurveda built a precise system rooted in close observation - called Arishta Lakshana - to predict outcomes. Arishta Lakshana refers to ominous clinical signs that indicate poor prognosis, incurability, or impending death. Ancient authors set aside full chapters to examine these markers, especially within the Indriya Sthana section of Charaka Samhita.<sup>1-3</sup> Spotting such signs shaped choices: continue aggressive therapy or shift focus toward comfort and support instead.

Though rooted in antiquity, assessments of final-stage deterioration in Ayurveda include tangible signs across bodily functions, senses, behavior, mental state, alongside external conditions. Several similarities can be observed between these classical descriptions and contemporary end-of-life clinical findings. - examples being noisy breathing near death, bluish skin tones, confusion, severe weight loss, failing organs, and experiences reported close to dying.<sup>5-8</sup> When examined together, features classified as Arishta Lakshana offer meaningful parallels to contemporary

methods predicting life's closing phase, enriching how whole-person care might be approached.

## Origins of Arishta Lakshana

Among ancient Ayurvedic writings, descriptions of Arishta Lakshana appear widely spread. Found throughout the Charaka Samhita's Indriya Sthana lies a full section focused on predicting near-death conditions. In similar fashion, works like the Sushruta Samhita, Bhela Samhita, and Ashtanga Samgraha examine markers linked to poor outcomes closely.<sup>1-3</sup>

Ayurveda considers equilibrium among Sharira (body), Indriya (senses), Satva (mind), and Atma (soul) essential for sustaining life. When the three doshas spiral out of control, a point may come - irreversible harm sets in, systems collapse, stability fades. Classical Ayurvedic scholars described these manifestations as indicators of irreversible systemic deterioration.

## Ayurvedic Texts Divide Arishta Lakshanas in to Three Groups

Certain Arishta Lakshanas are considered definitive indicators of impending death and are associated with irreversible pathology. These signals show clearly what lies ahead. Certain symptoms point straight to the end. Clear warnings emerge well before the moment arrives. A fixed pattern reveals itself through visible clues. Predictable signs make the outcome known beforehand.

Some signs may be temporary or reversible depending upon disease progression and therapeutic intervention. What seems fixed today might ease tomorrow under different circumstances. Fluctuating states often respond when triggers fade or adjust. Some

reactions stay brief, vanishing once balance returns. Moments of strain do not always settle into long-term patterns.

Classical texts also describe pseudo-Arishta Lakshanas, which may resemble fatal signs without indicating true terminal prognosis.<sup>3</sup>

What sets this system apart is how Ayurvedic doctors carefully observe signs to tell when a serious condition might still improve versus one that has passed the point of recovery. Each judgment hinges on subtle shifts rather than fixed markers. One key aspect lies in tracking energy patterns before labeling an outcome. Often, it's the pace of change - not just symptoms - that guides decisions. Clarity emerges through repeated assessments over time. Recovery potential remains under review until clear endpoints appear.

### **Panchendriya Pariksha and Prognostic Assessment**

Examining a person through the five senses forms a core method in Ayurvedic diagnosis, known as Panchendriya Pariksha. Through sight, smell, hearing, touch, and speech, the practitioner observes traits like skin tone, body odor, vocal quality, and physical texture. Sudden deviations from an individual's normal sensory and physical characteristics were considered prognostically significant. These abrupt deviations are labeled Arishta Lakshanas in classical texts.

Though technology shapes much of today's diagnostics, hands-on patient assessment still holds value in medical practice. Tools used in palliative care often look at signs like breathing trouble, swelling, confusion, eating ability, and loss of physical function.<sup>4-6</sup> Where mainstream approaches favor numbers and test results, Ayurvedic methods bring together personal experience

and visible symptoms within a broader view of health. While modern medicine primarily relies on objective measurements, Ayurvedic assessment incorporates qualitative sensory observations and holistic clinical interpretation.

### **How Arishta Signs Develop in Disease**

Ayurveda links end stage decline to lasting Vata imbalance and harm to core organs Hridaya Shira Basti

### **Vata Subtypes and Their End Stage Signs**

Among the five forms of Vata, each shows distinct late-stage signs. When Prana Vayu becomes severely disturbed near the end, it triggers intense discomfort in both the heart and anal area - despite governing breath and heartbeat. These manifestations may resemble symptoms observed in advanced malignancies involving thoracic and pelvic structures.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning with breath, Udana Vayu brings swelling in the neck and troubled breathing - patterns seen alongside compressed upper chest veins due to late-stage lung cancers. Severe gut disruptions follow when Samana Vayu is disturbed: frequent loose stools appear, fluid builds up, belly aches intensify, much like what happens during far-advanced inflammation of the intestines. Disturbance of Vyana Vayu is associated with muscular wasting, impaired mobility, and neuromuscular dysfunction. When Apana Vayu fails, intense pain erupts deep within the pelvis - a sign often linked to widespread cancer growth below the waistline.<sup>2</sup>

### **Trimarma and the breakdown of systems**

Trimarma—Shira, Hridaya, and Basti—are regarded in Ayurveda as vital anatomical and physiological centers essential for

survival. Each holds a quiet power, shaping what it means to be alive within the body's rhythm

- Shira (head/brain)
- Hridaya (heart)
- Basti (pelvic-visceral system)

When damage to these systems cannot be reversed, the body fails in ways that lead to death. Today's medical understanding treats loss of brain function, heart failure, and widespread organ breakdown as clear signs of a dying process.<sup>6</sup>

### **Dermatological and Morphological Changes**

Changes in skin tone, appearance, and overall glow hold significance as signs of health outcomes according to Ayurvedic writings.<sup>3</sup>

### **Chaya and Praticchaya**

Classical Ayurvedic texts describe bluish-black discoloration, greenish hue, and loss of skin luster as unfavorable prognostic indicators.<sup>3</sup> Such changes match today's reports of poor oxygen levels, patchy skin color, weak blood flow to limbs, bluish extremities, and failing circulation.<sup>7</sup>

Mottling often appears during the final day to three days before death, signaling major disruption in nervous system control over blood flow - widely seen as a trustworthy marker that the body has entered its closing phase.<sup>7-8</sup>

### **Edema and Ascites**

Heavy swelling across the body, called Shopha, along with bloating of the belly, known as Udara, signals serious illness in weak individuals according to Ayurvedic texts.<sup>2</sup> Today, fluid buildup from cancer and widespread tissue swelling similarly point

to limited life expectancy in palliative care settings.<sup>8</sup>

### **Terminal Ulcers**

Ulcers that heal slowly or appear without clear pattern signal serious concern in Ayurvedic tradition.<sup>4</sup> While terminal phase unfolds, fragile skin may break down fast - a reality now named Kennedy Terminal Ulcer by current medical practice.

### **Olfactory and Auditory Signs - Gandha (Smell)**

Smell of decay coming from tissues often signals serious decline, according to Ayurvedic principles.<sup>3</sup> In current medical practice, such stench links closely to dying cancerous tissue or deep infections lacking oxygen.

### **Swara (Voice)**

Hoarseness appearing without warning may signal an underlying issue. A shift in voice strength often points toward physical deterioration. Changes in speaking ability sometimes reflect damage to specific nerves. Evidence links these signs to paralysis of the recurrent laryngeal nerve. Certain late-stage chest cancers show similar patterns. Severe loss of function in critical systems can manifest this way. Neurological worsening frequently accompanies such symptoms.

### **Respiratory Prognostic Indicators**

#### **Death Rattle**

Respiratory fluids build up when dying individuals can no longer swallow or cough. In Ayurveda, such respiratory obstruction is interpreted as impaired Vata movement associated with Kapha accumulation. Disrupted Vata, along with excess Kapha, plays a central role in that framework

## **Cheyne–Stokes Respiration**

Beginning irregularly, Cheyne–Stokes respiration shows a repeating shift between breathlessness and pauses in breathing. Cheyne–Stokes respiration is commonly associated with advanced cardiac failure, neurological injury, and terminal systemic deterioration. In old Ayurvedic writings, doctors named such signs Sadyo Maraneeya Shwasa - marking them as signals near life's edge

## **Intractable Hiccups**

Hiccups that linger often signal serious decline when seen in weakened individuals, according to Ayurvedic teachings.<sup>2</sup> In today's medical practice, relentless hiccups appear alongside profound metabolic collapse or damage within the brainstem.

## **Brain and Mind Shifts**

Long before modern medicine, signs of advanced nervous system deterioration appeared clearly in ancient Ayurvedic texts.<sup>1</sup>

## **Terminal Delirium**

Though ancient, Ayurveda's account of mental unrest mirrors what today's end-of-life medicine labels terminal delirium.<sup>8</sup> This state often unfolds through disordered thinking, vivid sensory distortions, and a body unable to stay still - driven by low brain oxygen and disrupted internal chemistry.

## **End of Life Dreams and Visions**

Classical Ayurvedic literature describes unusual dreams and visions as potential prognostic indicators in terminal illness. These nighttime images often unfold as quiet travels through unknown lands, hinting at endings. While some dreamers

speak to those long gone, others follow paths that vanish into darkness. These phenomena were traditionally interpreted as indicators of impending death.

Some people near death report clear dreams about lost loved ones or journeys beyond life - studies now confirm this pattern.<sup>9</sup> Rather than confusion, such moments tend to bring peace and personal significance.

## **Doota Adhyaya and Caregiver Outlook**

A different angle in Ayurvedic forecasting involves watching how the person bringing news behaves. Doota Adhyaya emphasizes the prognostic importance of observing the messenger's behavior, demeanor, and emotional state.

Research confirms the idea by examining stress in caregivers, mental strain, along with factors like income and access to services. When caregiving becomes overwhelming, it can harm both treatment quality and emotional stability.

## **Ojas Depletion Leading to Metabolic Collapse and Organ System Breakdown**

Beginning with ancient wellness traditions, Ojas stands for deep energy, resistance to illness, and balance within the body. When Ojas fades - called Ojo-kshaya - the system weakens toward irreversible breakdown.<sup>2</sup>

Today's medical understanding links such conditions to:

- Multiorgan Dysfunction Syndrome (MODS)
- Severe inflammatory response
- Cytokine storm
- Persistent hyperlactatemia
- Coagulopathy
- Hypocholesterolemia<sup>6</sup>

Some contemporary authors have attempted to conceptually correlate biochemical markers such as serum cholesterol with the Ayurvedic concept of Ojas; however, further scientific validation is required. While one field speaks of vital energy, the other measures molecules; both may point toward similar ground through this connection.

### **Modern Prediction Methods Compared with Ayurvedic Clinical Judgment**

Survival chances often get estimated by measuring things like eating ability, shortness of breath, swelling, confusion, and physical function. Tools including the PPS, PPI, and Surprise Question help guide these predictions in current palliative care practice.

Unlike standard models, Ayurveda looks at signs through senses, watches how people act, studies their dreams, thought patterns, shifts in surroundings, along with community influences.<sup>2</sup> Such a layered view of body, mind, and setting could add depth to today's prediction methods.

### **Ethical Aspects of Predicting Outcomes**

When clear signs of Arishta Lakshanas appear, Ayurveda discourages forceful therapies. Far from suggesting withdrawal, this stance aims to prevent empty efforts and added distress. Instead, it quietly supports a gentler path - one that respects natural limits while steering away from strain.

Comfort comes first in today's palliative approach - symptom management, future care choices, respectful death, along with joint decisions shaping its core.<sup>10</sup> Clear prediction of illness course matters just as much here; without it, kindness and ethics at life's edge lose ground.

### **Blending Ayurvedic Practices with Contemporary End of Life Support**

Though rooted in tradition, certain Ayurvedic approaches might help ease the burden of late-stage disease. External applications, mild detoxification methods, or rejuvenation techniques could play a role alongside care routines focused on nutrition. Breathing exercises sometimes pair well with movement practices like yoga. Emotional support through guided dialogue also emerges as part of the picture. Gentle cleansing processes appear within these options too. Each element fits differently depending on individual needs.<sup>10</sup>

Some research indicates Ayurvedic approaches could ease pain, along with fatigue, while also affecting anxiety levels and improving disrupted sleep patterns during palliative care.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Among ancient healing systems, Ayurveda developed detailed signs of impending decline - known as Arishta Lakshana - long before similar ideas appeared elsewhere. Skin shifts, breath irregularities, fading senses, strange dreams, nerve function drop-offs, and body-wide breakdowns were noted centuries ago. These traditional markers line up closely with what today's end-of-life care teams observe. Patterns once described through spiritual insight now match clinical data gathered in hospitals. Early warnings from old texts find echoes in current symptom tracking. Ancient records show a sharp eye for subtle bodily signals. These observations were primarily based on detailed clinical examination and sensory assessment. Details passed down reveal an intricate awareness of dying processes. These prognostic descriptions reflect systematic clinical observation documented within

classical Ayurvedic literature. Long-standing descriptions align unexpectedly well with recent research outcomes

Though modern medicine relies on lab values, prediction models, and standardized assessments to measure end-of-life changes, Ayurvedic practice focuses on subtle signs detected through touch, sight, yet intuitive synthesis of patient presentation. Even if their techniques differ, each approach recognizes identical shifts in body function and mental state as life nears its close.

Integrating selected Ayurvedic observational principles with modern palliative assessment may enhance holistic prognostic evaluation, particularly in resource-limited settings. Quality of life might rise when such therapies join care routines, adding depth to comfort near life's end.

Prognosis goes beyond forecasting death - it shapes how doctors act when time runs short. When foresight guides care, unnecessary treatments fade into the background. Families find footing amid uncertainty because someone has offered clarity. Suffering often lessens once goals shift toward what truly matters. Dignity stays present, not by chance, but through deliberate attention near life's end.

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