

FROM A HOSPICE DOCTOR

It is difficult to explain to other physicians (and for that matter to other staff) what hospice represents, or what we do, for that matter. But somehow, I think everyone, including families, patients and health professionals understand what it is that we are all trying to achieve.

Dying is certainly a part of life. It is perhaps the most difficult part of life, sometimes more so for those who are left with the thoughts and memories of the patients. As we all know, cancer is a large part of the hospice program. It is the majority of the patients that we see. But hospice is not just about treating cancer patients. Hospice is about taking care of patients who are terminally ill and dying. Hospice is about helping the patients and families. Hospice is about dying with dignity, free of suffering, with love and care.

All of us have been touched by this at one time or another. I personally lost my father-in-law to pancreatic cancer about a year ago now. He was helped by hospice, but I have to admit that there were a lot of problems, and suffering was a large part of his last days. It certainly made me much more aware of our hospice goals.

About a month ago during one of our hospice meetings, I asked about a patient and the nurse answered, "He died peacefully without any suffering." There were tears in the room; there was joy; there was happiness; there were a variety of emotional outbursts, and ultimately there was a good feeling in the room. I think that best describes what we do as hospice. The social workers who were present, the chaplains, the minister, the volunteers, the nurse's aides, the nurses, and everyone involved in the room expressed some kind of emotion of happiness that this had happened.

These are the rewards that we receive back, knowing that we have accomplished something that often is hard to do. This patient died with dignity, with care, with love, in her home, free of suffering. I find it easier not to try to explain hospice (at least not to myself) but to remember that moment. There is no greater reward for me as a physician.

The Hospice team has a lot of responsibilities. I have found over the years that the rewards far outweigh the responsibilities. Patients and families always teach us something about life. Sometimes it is courage; sometimes it is love; and sometimes it is about dying, but we always learn something from them. Apart from our responsibilities to helping the patients and their families, we have a responsibility to continue to educate those around us, whether it is health professionals or non-health professionals. We accomplish that by continuing to learn about all aspects of hospice care, including the psychological aspects, and the medical care.

Certainly we all know that there is some deficiency amongst health care professionals in pain management, but I personally believe that has improved, particularly in our county over the past three or four years, and that is due directly to the involvement of the Hospice Team. I learn from nurses, from patients, from volunteers. We will learn whether one pain medicine is working well or not working well, whether it has side effects, or how should we help with these side effects. It is an integral part of what we do.

But all of this continues to come down to those wonderful words the nurse stated, "She died peacefully." There are countless quotations in the Bible, some out of the Bible, and many great men have talked about this and theorized about this. But there is no feeling like actually seeing this, being a part of this, and being ultimately rewarded by a hug. So I personally believe that as we go along doing our hospice care, we should keep one thing in mind.

We should strive not to be a man or woman of success, but to be a man or woman of VALUE. That quotation is from Albert Einstein, and I think it clearly defines how I would like to perceive my role and our role, in the care of the patients, and their families, during their last days on this earth.

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