

Palliative Care Provides Extra Concern For Patients, Families

By Dr. Jennifer Ritzau

Palliative care is a medical term many of us have heard of, but not fully understood. Actually it's a simple concept.

To palliate means to make someone comfortable by treating symptoms that result from a serious illness. The goal is to improve the quality of a seriously ill person's life and to support that person and their family during and after treatment.

Both hospice and palliative care share an underlying philosophy, but they differ in one important way: with palliative care, patients can receive aggressive treatment for their chronic illness along with aggressive palliative care for their symptoms.

In 2006, palliative medicine became its own board-certified subspecialty of internal medicine for employing a multidisciplinary approach to patient care.

Nurses, chaplains, social workers, psychologists, pharmacists and other health professionals cooperate to create a plan of care addressing the range of physical, emotional, spiritual and social needs of patients and families.

I first became interested in this specialty as a third-year resident in medical school. At that time, patients considered incurable were left to suffer in rooms at the end of the hall. I befriended one such older woman with cervical cancer, and kept returning to her room to sit with her. She taught me what it was like to endure loss and pain. Her doctor didn't tell her the likely prognosis. When she died, I swore I would never again allow a patient to be surprised.

Having honest conversations about outcomes is a central to palliative care. When patient and family understand the real picture, they can make appropriate decisions that may surely differ if a prognosis is weeks vs. years. Most doctors are not taught in medical school that communication is a vital additional procedure. The value

of palliative care is that it allows patients and families to experience the best possible quality of life for whatever amount of time they have left, whether being cared for at home, in a facility or at a hospital.

Here are some common questions about palliative care:

Just what is it?

Palliative care is a specialized form of medical care that provides relief from the symptoms and stress of a serious illness. Working with the healthcare team, palliative care specialists provide an extra layer of support to families and patients struggling with the burdens of serious illness.

Is palliative care right for me?

It may be if you are experiencing symptoms due to a serious illness such as pain, nausea, fatigue, shortness of breath and stress. Palliative care should be started as soon as patients are diagnosed with a serious, life-threatening illness.

What does palliative care do?

The palliative care team identifies sources of pain and discomfort and provides treatment that offers relief. The teams emphasize communication among the patient, family and doctors to ensure the patient's needs are fully met. These include establishing goals of care, help with decision-making and coordination of care. They also provide emotional support to family and caregivers.

What can I expect?

Working with the existing healthcare team, palliative care specialists seek to provide an extra layer of support so a plan of care can be agreed upon to assure the patient's needs and wishes are being met and that treatments are in line with goals.

Do I have to give up my own doctor?

No.

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