

# How To Know When It's Time For Hospice Care

By Andrea Kelly

Statistics show that one third of those who die each year suffer from a chronic illness. In a recent Gallup poll 90 percent of Americans said if they were faced with a terminal illness they would prefer to be cared for and die in their homes. Hospice care is a quality of life choice available when a patient no longer responds to curative treatment. It is often utilized during the last six months of life when patients prefer to spend time at home with family members rather than remain in a hospital environment.

When a terminally ill patient cannot be cured with aggressive treatments, the patient and family member have the option of considering hospice care. Quality of life is the most important consideration. For many patients, continuing painful treatments and therapies and enduring a stressful hospital environment are very distasteful.

The goal in hospice care is to improve the patient's last days by offering comfort and dignity in a less stressful setting. Hospice care focuses on dealing with all symptoms of a chronic illness with an emphasis on alleviating pain and discomfort. Specially trained caregivers also help patients deal with the emotional, social, and spiritual impact of their disease.

The services of hospice care include a variety of counseling and bereavement services for family members before and after a patient's death. Eighty percent of hospice care is provided in the patient's home, a family member's home, or in a nursing home. Some inpatient hospice facilities are also available to assist with patients who need more intensive care.

For many families it is difficult to know when the time is right to consider a hospice. If the patient is receiving treatments that no longer seem to help and the doctor has said there are no alternative treatments or other medical options available, hospice care should be considered. If the patient is very fatigued, sleeping a lot, unable to eat, or consistently short of breath, hospice may be an option. When caring for the patient is becoming increasingly difficult for family members, the support of hospice staff can help. If round-the clock hospital care is draining the family financially and treatments aren't helping, hospice should be considered. To retain the services of a hospice you will need a referral from a medical professional indicating that the patient is terminally ill.

Many families don't consider hospice care because they mistakenly believe it is too expensive. In most cases hospice service is less expensive than conventional care during the last six months of life. Since less high-tech equipment is used and family, friends, and volunteers provide the majority of daily care at home, costs can be reduced significantly.

Some terminally ill patients and their families resist hospice care because they fear they can't retain their own doctor. In truth, hospice physicians consult with the patient's doctor to determine the best plan of care. Volunteers, family members, and friends work closely with medical professionals in coordinating a team approach to care.

Patients are required to have a doctor's referral to receive hospice care. Patients and family members seem to benefit the most from hospice when life expectancy is around six months. Hospice care, including medications and equipment, is covered under Medicare for patients with a prognosis of six months or less. Patients can remain in hospice care after six months if a doctor certifies that the patient is terminally ill. If the patient is younger than 65, refer to individual insurance policies for covered hospice benefits.

After a hospice is contacted, the staff meets with the patient's personal doctor and a hospice physician to discuss the patient's medical history, current condition, and life expectancy. Prior to entering the program the patient and family meet with staff to discuss services, financial and insurance resources, medications, equipment needs, and the support system. A plan of care is developed for each patient and it is reviewed and revised to adapt to the patient's condition.

Hospice care includes physician services, regular home visits by registered and licensed practical nurses, assistance from home health aides for dressing and bathing, counseling services, medical equipment and supplies, pain management and symptom control, specialized services such as physical therapy, and volunteer support to assist caregivers and family members.

You can find a hospice in your area by checking the local Yellow Pages under "Hospice," or ask your doctor or local hospital for referrals.