

The realities of hospice care

By Carla Lucas
Editor

In general the word "hospice" elicits a picture in one's mind of care for the last few days of a person's life. The phrase, "we called hospice," conjures an image of the very, very end of a loved one's life, maybe even the image of giving up hope.

The reality of what hospice care can do for the patient and the family is much greater. The employees of Willow Tree

Hospice, a newly organized hospice care agency based in West Grove, Pennsylvania, want people to better understand all the benefits hospice care can provide during the end-stage of life.

"One common myth about hospice care is that it is a death sentence. It isn't," said Christine Coll, administrator of Willow Tree Hospice. "We recognize that families are greatly affected by the illness of a loved one. We help both patients and families through this difficult process. We occasionally have a patient that 'graduates' and doesn't require our services for a while. After a patient dies the families are grateful for the help we've given them."

"Hospice care is a gentle way to leave the world and accomplish your end of life goals," said Courtney Miller, a hospice nurse with Willow Tree Hospice. "Wherever home is, we deliver end of life services to the patient and their family."

"People sometimes go into the intensive care unit at a hospital in futility. It is rough on the patient and family," said Joan Renner, clinical director for Willow Tree Hospice. "Hospice care is an alternative where patients can be home and surrounded by their family and die in peace."

Hospice care provides physical, emotional, and spiritual support for patients with end-stage diagnoses that may include: Alzheimer's/dementia, cancer, end stage cardiac disease, chronic



obstructive pulmonary disease, congestive heart failure, decline in health, Parkinson's disease, and renal failure.

According to Coll, many families and physicians wait too long to bring hospice care into the clinical care process.

Families can maximize the benefits of hospice care by contacting hospice when there is a six-month prognosis of a terminal illness or end-stage diagnosis. "This gives us time to get to know the family and patient and to bond with them," she said.

"For families, it is scary to see someone die. They don't know what to expect. We can prepare them each step of the way," said Renner. "When people are prepared, they are not as afraid."

Within two hours of receiving an inquiry or referral for hospice care, a staff member from Willow Tree Hospice will talk with the family and explain the program and services available.

"We create a unique and tailored care plan for each person," said Coll. "We talk with each patient and family member about his or her goals. Then, as a team, we organize our care to meet their needs."

These services include nursing care, home health aides, social needs, nutritional needs, chaplain, and equipment, supplies, and medications related to the terminal illness.

Within the staff of Willow Tree Hospice are registered nurses, social workers, spiritual counselors, bereavement counselors, hospice aides, and dieticians. "We have a pool of people that can't be beat," said Coll. "Our staff works to support the individual's care."

"We act as a liaison between the family, the physician, and the pharmacist. There is a coordination of services, a system in place to make it all happen," said Frank Reynolds, a hospice nurse with Willow Tree Hospice. "Sometimes it is overwhelming for a family to coordinate everything."

The hospice team works in collaboration with the attending physician. The physician reviews the plan of treatment. "Families and physicians often don't realize how much of the burden we can take off of them," said Coll.

The chaplain is available for spiritual comfort for the patient and family. "The chaplain is there to listen and to meet the patient from where he or she is coming from; to resolve issues for a smooth passage," said Coll.

"We act as mentors and coaches and help the families manage as much as they possibly can," said Jamila Blake, the social worker at Willow Tree Hospice. Social needs that can be addressed include finding caregiver support groups, conflict resolution, childcare, and coordinating with other social



Photo by Carla Lucas
Among the staff at Willow Tree Hospice are (sitting) Joan Renner and Christine Coll; (standing) Jamila Blake, Frank Reynolds, and Courtney Miller.

service agencies. One important benefit of hospice care is bereavement counseling post death.

Medicare and most private insurance companies offer hospice care benefits. Typically, a patient will waive their medical benefits and elect hospice care to take them through the dying process. "One thing people should realize is that in choosing hospice care, they are not locked in. They can always change their mind and go back to traditional care," said Coll. Included in Medicare hospice benefits is 13 months of bereavement counseling, some-

thing that many people do not realize.

Willow Tree Hospice is owned and operated by a family of nurses. It was created to bring an individualized personal approach to the dying process.

Willow Tree Hospice is state licensed and serves patients throughout southern Chester County, southeastern Lancaster County, and southwestern Delaware County. They can be contacted at 610-869-2201. Their website is www.willowtreehospice.com.

