

Willow Tree Hospice opens to serve Southern Chester County

Terminally ill patients can spend their last days at home.

By PRUE OSBORN

Willow Tree Hospice has opened in Chester County, making it easier for the area's terminally ill patients to choose spending their final days at home rather than in a hospital.

Based in Jennersville, Willow Tree was licensed and certified this summer. Hospice administrator Christine Coll said the words "integrity, reliability and compassion" sum up WillowTree. Its mission is to provide medical, physical and emotional support to the dying patient, as well as information, comfort and support to the caregivers.

Its founders, all registered nurses, saw a need for hospice in their home area of Chester County and thought it critical to provide it. Coll, a registered nurse certified in gerontology who worked for 25 years in long-term care, five years with hospice care and helped open five hospices in five states joined forces with her brother and her future sister-in-law. Frank Reynolds is a registered nurse, who specialized in home care. His fiancé Courtney Miller is Willow Tree's clinical director and also a registered nurse certified in critical care nursing.

Hospice patients are adults in the end stages of illness or dementia with less than six months to live. Hospice care is a benefit Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance beneficiaries can elect.

Willow Tree Hospice takes a "palliative approach" in order to allow the patient to die in the comfort of their own home or nursing care facility with-

out further aggressive medical treatment. When a patient is appropriate for hospice, a cure is no longer possible and they and their family elect hospice care rather than hospitalization.

Before a patient is accepted for hospice care, two physicians — including the patient's primary care physician and the hospice medical director — must recommend them for hospice. Miller said usually the patient is in declining health with a variety of problems causing numerous hospitalizations. Most, if not all, she said, are looking for "symptom management without hospitalization."

The staff, Miller said, thinks of the patient and family as "one unit of care." The family is counseled through the grieving process before the death of their loved one and for a year after. It is important, she said, for the family to know the goal of hospice at their first meeting.

"We don't want to be doomsayers. We want [their loved one] to live and be comfortable. Families need to know hospice does not mean they are giving up on their loved one. It's hard no matter what."

Willow Tree's orientation guide states, "Hospice emphasizes quality, rather than length of life. Hospice neither hastens nor postpones your death. It affirms life and regards dying as a normal process."

A common misconception is that a hospice should be called in just for the last few days of a person's life. Miller said the sooner hospice is called the more peaceful the last months will be. The patient will have

the peace of mind of knowing they are where they want to be and their caregivers will be better prepared, knowing what to expect and that help is just a phone call away.

The hospice staff is a team. Along with Coll, Reynolds and Miller there is a medical director, a social worker, a chaplain, home health aides, a dietician and carefully selected and trained volunteers who work either in the office or do home visits.

An individualized care plan is developed for and with each patient, with the involvement of the primary care physician and the input of caregivers. The plan takes into account the goals, needs, problems, treatments, care and personal wishes of that patient to best serve them.

Medicare and other insurance plans will reimburse the cost of hospice care including medication and supplies related to the terminal illness, scheduled intermittent nursing care, home health aides and emotional and spiritual support. A nurse is on call 24 hours per day for the patient and the family.

If the patient's prognosis changes or if there is a change of heart, hospice services can be terminated. Patients then have the right, if re-approved, to engage hospice again when the need arises. While encouraged to do so, hospice patients do not need to complete advanced directives or living wills to enroll in hospice. Miller said Willow Tree accepts patients from Southern Chester County, southern Lancaster County and southern Delaware County. "We plan to stay local, small and quality."

For more information, call Willow Tree Hospice, 610-869-2201.