

Legally Speaking

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Hospice Care

First, full disclosure. I am a member of the Pikes Peak Hospice and Palliative Care Foundation Board of Trustees. It is the only community-based non-profit hospice in town. I accepted that (unpaid) position because I have seen too many people ravaged by the emotional impact of the passing of a long-suffering loved one and have learned first hand that hospice can do much to buffer that crucial period in all of our lives. So what follows is something from the heart, founded on what I know Pikes Peak Hospice and Palliative Care does and has been doing for nearly a quarter century.

Most of what I try to do in my practice is to ease the legal burden associated with a family death so that grieving can run its course and healing begin. Critical to accomplishing my goal is legal *planning*. We've talked about wills, powers of attorney, long term care, and advanced medical directives. That's all legal pre-planning. What I've learned is that planning for end of life care is every bit as important to the emotional well-being of the family, perhaps even more so. Hospice can do much to ease that crucial transition for a family and to allow a family member to pass away with dignity, comfort and surrounded with love.

Hospice is not a place you go to die. It's not even a place, really. Rather it's a constellation of care services for the individual and the family facing a life ending illness or condition. These services include palliative care by an interdisciplinary team headed by licensed physicians specializing in the treatment of pain and symptom management. As well, emotional, spiritual, and educational counseling help the family and the member to cope with grief and the sense of impending loss. These kinds of services are available 24-7, and can be given in the home, at a long-term care facility, or in the hospice residence itself. And it involves trained caregivers, both professional and volunteer, who can be with the loved one to free the family caregiver(s) for a spell away from home.

It doesn't end with the passing of the loved one. Quality hospice also means caring for the family during its bereavement, marking those special first anniversaries that can be so wrenching in the aftermath of death with special attention and caring.

Accessing hospice care is usually done through your physician, and assessment nurses will visit to assess the needs of the patient and the family. Many, in fact most, hospice services are covered by Medicare, Medicaid, and most private insurance. Expenses typically not covered include prescriptions unrelated to the terminal illness and room and board for patients residing in either the hospice residence facility or long term care. Tricare, for many of us, will cover most of what few gaps remain.

Saying that death is a natural part of life doesn't (for me at least) make it one bit easier when that inevitable time comes. Acceptance comes hard, both for the patient and for his family. Doing what you can to anticipate these kinds of contingencies, especially for those families who know that they are or soon will be facing terminal illnesses, can be

a positive first step. Now is the time to at least investigate and try to understand more about hospice. So add it to your to-do list. Planning for the emotional and spiritual needs of your family are at least as important as anything else you can tend to.