caring for those you care about

Getting the Facts on **Palliative Care**

"In the three years since my 82-year-old mother was diagnosed with heart disease, she has been getting progressively worse. She says that she is having some discomfort and is frequently short of breath. Because of this, she won't go out socially and has lost interest in her favorite hobbies. Her doctor said that he thought she would benefit greatly from something called palliative care, but we are hesitant because we don't know what is involved. Help! What is palliative care?"

It is no wonder that people are getting confused with some of the medical terminology today. Because of the tremendous strides that the health care field has made in diagnosing and treating illnesses, new approaches to care are constantly being developed.

Palliative care addresses the needs of patients who have chronic and/or life-threatening illnesses such as heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, and AIDS. A medical specialty, palliative care enhances the individual's overall quality of life by providing a wide range of services. This Tip Sheet will give you an overview of palliative care and show you how it treats the "whole person."

What Is Palliative Care?

Palliative care is a team-oriented approach for persons whose illnesses are not responsive to curative treatment. It focuses on the management of the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of patients and their families so that they can live life to the fullest each day. Also known as comfort care, palliative care's goal is not to cure the illness. Rather, it is to provide comfort and maintain the highest possible quality of life for patients and their families. While palliative care can be introduced at any stage of a person's illness, it plays its biggest role at the end of life to ensure that the patient's needs are being met.

How Does Palliative Care Work?

Palliative care focuses on care of the whole person during the course of the illness. To do this, palliative care brings together a diverse team of professionals, including:

- Physicians;
- Nurses;
- Pharmacists;

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- Social workers;
- Pastoral counselors;
- Physical therapists;
- Occupational therapists;
- Music therapists;
- Art therapists;
- Specially trained volunteers.

This team works with the patient and family members to provide a continuum of care that can begin with the onset of an illness or whenever comfort, support, and quality of life issues are significant concerns.

Did You Know?
In general, palliative care is an umbrella term that refers to relieving symptoms while not pursuing a cure for the disease. Originally linked to hospice care, palliative care today has taken on a new and expanded meaning. With the introduction of a new medical field of expertise devoted solely to palliative care, the term has come to mean much more than pain management.

Who Can Receive Palliative Care?

Although many people feel that palliative care is only for persons with cancer, this is not true. Palliative care services are available to anyone regardless of culture, age, and gender.

Where Is Palliative Care Offered?

Palliative care may be delivered in a wide range of locations, including doctors' offices, clinics, long-term care settings, and at home. In addition, many medical institutions are beginning to develop palliative care programs within their settings to augment their existing services.

Does Having Palliative Care Mean I Have to Give Up Treatment?

No. Some patients receiving palliative care may pursue other life-prolonging therapies, including chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery.

What About My General Physician?

As a key member of the palliative care team, your doctor serves to coordinate services and is actively involved in your care.

Is Palliative Care Widely Accepted?

As one of the newest disciplines in the health care field, palliative care is widely recognized by medical organizations and professionals as being a medical specialty. Professionals who specialize in palliative medicine receive special training and certification.

In addition, many health care organizations have adopted the *Precepts of Palliative Care*, guidelines developed by the national coalition, Last Acts, that highlight attention to patient and caregiver concerns. Several organizations, such as the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, can provide referrals to physicians who specialize in palliative care.

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