

Hospice touts alternative to Kevorkian's way

BY BARB PERT TEMPLETON
STAFF WRITER

When Dr. Jack Kevorkian assisted in the Sept. 17 suicide of 52-year-old Thomas Youk, an ALS patient from Waterford, he said Youk and his family expressed concern that he might choke to death on his own saliva.

That frightening event would not have been an issue if Youk had contacted Hospice of Michigan.

Care coordinator Gloria Kovak explained that Hospice has a number of medications that could have prevented such an occurrence plus kept Youk comfortable.

Providing a swift solution to a sad situation via assisted suicide is far from the agenda of the Hospice program.

"We are here to provide comfort and quality of life so the patient dies with peace and dignity," Kovak said.

"And I think with people in the medical profession the general consensus is that the doctors should not be involved in assisted suicide and I agree," Kovak

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Gloria Kovak
—Hospice care coordinator

said. "And since it's also an illegal act in the state of Michigan, law enforcement needs to deal with it."

Dragging out the inevitable or bringing the black cloud of death to the door may be an interpretation of Hospice for some, but that's just not the case, Kovak said.

"That's not what Hospice is about. Sometimes the community feels that way but they don't need to feel that way because Hospice is about life and about living," Kovak said. "We're not hastening or prolonging life. We're letting the disease take its normal course."

Being accepted into the Hospice program requires the patient have a terminal diagnosis

from their medical professional. The care provided is available 24 hours a day from a number of different sources.

"It's comprehensive care that addresses the emotional, spiritual and physical needs of the patient, it's almost holistic," said Tracy Lark, director of communications. "Our goal following Proposal B is to make sure everyone at least knows what Hospice is for their end of life decisions."

The Hospice services can be provided wherever the patient wants including the hospital, a nursing home or at their own residence. The experience is often a time of reuniting and reconciliation for families and patients and most gain a good sense of closure, Lark said.

"There is value to this time and a large part of our job is helping families to cope because it's very frightening for them," Lark said. "We understand what they are facing and eliminate their fears and bring hope back into their life so they are not feeling so helpless."

The fact that Hospice can provide

relief from the pain and can be such a strong emotional support base for the family has made this third harrowing cancer experience easier for Hoppe. She feels better about her mother's situation simply because her mom is so comfortable with Hospice.

"We show families that this experience can be a gift of love they provide to their loved ones at the end of life," Kovak said. "Everybody comes to us at different levels of acceptance and our goal is help the family come to level of acceptance that is often necessary to see the patient through the progress of the disease."

Hospice of Michigan, based in Southfield, is the largest provider of Hospice Care in the state, serving 900 patients a day. It is the largest non-profit Hospice organization in the country and takes every patient regardless of ability to pay, although many insurance companies and Medicaid cover the service.

To contact Hospice of Michigan, call (248) 559-9209.

Hills woman with cancer believes life is only option

Grace Fraser, 85, of Farmington Hills, was diagnosed with terminal cancer in October and entered the Hospice program soon afterwards. Despite her grave condition she never considered assisted suicide an option.

"That I don't approve of and that was not even an issue with me," Fraser said, citing religious reasons for her opinion. "Hospice care is wonderful and I'm so grateful to God that I found it."

Fraser's daughter, Joyce Hoppe, brought Hospice to her home on the recommendation of a neighbor. Her mother's diagnosis marks the third time in the last eight years that Hoppe has faced losing a family member to cancer.

She provided complete care for her husband until he was hospitalized and passed away before she even knew about Hospice. Her younger sister also died following a two-year battle with cancer.

'That (assisted suicide) I don't approve of and that was not even an issue with me.'

Grace Fraser
—Farmington Hills resident and cancer patient

"The assisted suicide issue is a mute point with me because I feel when it's time to go you will go," Hoppe said. "And I know when you see people suffering some might think it should be ended, but personally I'm against it."

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