



Dying with dignity

Member's hospice service puts God first

by Sabrina Arena Ferrisi

David Stephenson

When Greg Patterson founded Covenant Hospice Services four years ago, he was mainly interested in building the business. But that didn't last long.

"I visited a three-year old boy with brain cancer," he recalls. "His parents had brought him home from the hospital to spend more time with him."

The night the child passed away, three staff members of Covenant Hospice Services were with the family. The child died in his father's arms.

"It was a very moving and good death," said Patterson, an at-large member from Lexington, Ky. "There can be a good death, like Our Lady's Assumption. Two-thirds of my staff went to the funeral."

Faith-guided principles

Patterson's organization has over 100 employees in six offices in Indiana and one in Kentucky. Its mission is to take care of terminally ill patients and their families. Though Covenant Hospice Services (CHS) is not explicitly Catholic, its guiding principles are based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church's* teachings on end-of-life issues. Its mission statement puts God in the center.

"You could lay out our guiding principles and the Catechism side-by-side, and they are virtually identical," Patterson said.



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Even if a patient's death is imminent, ordinary care is never interrupted. CHS believes that discontinuing medical procedures can be legitimate if they are not dangerous or disproportionate to the expected outcome.

Hospice programs in the U.S. increase every year—from one in 1974 to 3,650 in 2004. Non-profit hospices make up 67% of the total. For-profit hospices, like CHS, are also increasing every year. Most hospice patients receive their care in their own homes or in a nursing home.

Patterson stresses the importance of spending time with patients and listening to them. In a prior job, he had worked in a nursing home's administration. Patterson often visited patients even though it was not officially his responsibility.

"I met a VA patient and spent about 15 minutes a day with him. I just took the time to listen. It turned out that he was the worst patient in the nursing home, a verbally abusive man. The nurses came to me later and asked, 'What did you do? He's completely changed!'"

Euthanasia infiltration

Not all hospices, however, approach patients with the same vision of human dignity and respect for the sanctity of life. Patterson and his staff are particularly concerned about the in-roads that euthanasia advocates have made among hospice organizations.

"The scary thing about the Terri Schiavo situation is that her case was a public awakening to something that has been going on for some time," he said.

The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) is one of the largest associations of hospices in the U.S. Pro-euthanasia lawyer William Colby spoke at its 2004 conference. Colby represented Nancy Cruzan's family before the U.S. Supreme Court in the first right-to-die case ever heard there. He also penned *Unplugged: Reclaiming our Right to Die in America*.

It is unclear exactly how many hospice organizations in the U.S. support euthanasia or physician assisted suicide (PAS). Patterson said he has noticed that many officially oppose euthanasia, like the NHPCO, but then invite euthanasia advocates to speak at their conferences.

Rita Marker, executive director of the International Task Force on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide, noted that the Florida hospice where Terri Schiavo died received a Heart of Hospice award from the NHPCO the year she died.

There is a complicated relationship at best, she said, between the hospice movement and the pro-euthanasia lobby.

"In Oregon, there is a marriage of hospices and assisted suicide advocates," she said. "Once it became legal, most hospices accepted it as one more treatment."

Oregon legalized physician assisted suicide (PAS) in 1997. The state's 80 hospices are allowed to offer PAS. The Oregon Hospice Association claims that "only" 246 people have chosen to go through with PAS in the last eight years.



Top and center photos: Brett Karanovich, Covenant's chaplain and community relations coordinator, and his staff pray with a patient at Cherish Living Nursing Home in Richmond, Ind. Bottom: Covenant Hospice CEO Greg Patterson chats with his COO, Chris Ice.



"When one refers to hospice, it is really important to look at their philosophy," said Marker. "How much training do they have in pain control? Going to a hospice should not hasten death."

The Netherlands, unlike Oregon, has very few hospices, and according to Marker's research, their pain control is abysmal.

"These pro-euthanasia groups talk about 'compassionate care,'" said Patterson. "I always think about what Dr. Gregory Hamilton, chair of Physicians for Compassionate Care said, 'Comfort care results in a comfortable patient. Assisted suicide results in a corpse.'"

Patterson's personal philosophy is completely opposite to that of euthanasia advocates. As a volunteer for the Missionaries of Charity over the last 18 years, his ministry mirrors theirs in many ways.

The poorest of the poor

"Our ministries are very similar. Mother Teresa took care of the poorest of the poor, the vulnerable ones. We are most vulnerable at two stages of our lives—the beginning and the end," Patterson explained.

"While Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity do much more than care for the terminally ill," he said. "That is one piece of their mission. We do the same thing when we care for our terminally ill patients. We care for them and their families during their final days, making them as comfortable as possible and allowing them, their families and friends, to say good-bye."

Patterson recalls a conversation he had in 2004 with Sr. Nirmala Joshi, Blessed Mother Teresa's successor.

"I met her outside the church, holding the door open for others leaving after Mass. I asked her what words I could give our terminally ill patients and she said: Tell them to trust in the Lord's mercy."

In 2004, Pope John Paul II addressed specialists in palliative care from 70 nations meeting at the Vatican. He told them that sickness and old age does not diminish the dignity of the human person. "Instead of rescuing a person from suffering, [euthanasia] eliminates him. True compassion promotes all reasonable efforts in favor of the patient's cure [and helps one cease such efforts] when all interventions are no longer useful to achieve that end."

For Patterson, extending the Lord's mercy to the dying through loving care is central to his work.

"That's what hospice is all about. It's about heart." ■

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