

2012 Cultural Competency Series: Care and Comfort at the End of Life

The Cultural Competency series tells the stories of UPMC employees who put patients and others first by being culturally competent and by recognizing each other's differences.

If there is ever a time when cultural competency is necessary, it's when a patient has reached the end-of-life stage. Understanding what patients and their families need or want isn't always obvious, because they might not know themselves. Every patient's passing is a unique occurrence. It's a time when the routine of life falls away and the world is reduced to the quiet events in a single room.

The staff at UPMC Bedford Memorial take great care to provide culturally competent care to patients who are about to pass on, as well as to their families. When a patient is close to the end, the staff ensures that the family's basic needs are taken care of so they don't have to leave the bedside for a moment.

"We have three rooms that are used for hospice/palliative care. They're larger rooms with a refrigerator, a pull-out sofa, and a recliner to sleep in," says **Kay Furry, RN**. The room has soft lighting and a music player to provide a soothing, comfortable environment. "We allow the family to stay around the clock, and if they do we get a hospitality cart with refreshments for them." The staff also handles any calls that the family may need to make, and will notify a pastoral representative or clergy as well.

Of course, the family isn't worried about their own comfort; all their attention is on their loved one. And the UPMC Bedford Memorial staff work to ensure that the patient's passing is as dignified and gentle as possible.

"We try to manage the palliative things, like the pain and comfort of the patient, and we take direction from the family if the patient can't communicate with us," Ms. Furry says. "At the end of life we also

have medications to help manage some of the symptomatic issues, like difficulty swallowing, so it's not so hard for the family to be there."

When the end of life does come, there are steps that need to be taken, although that might be the last thing on the minds of grieving family members. Even though the time for medical care has passed, the staff help arrange matters with the undertaker and explain to the family what they need to do, who will contact them, and who will take care of the patient's things. Dealing with these issues, which are important but at that sad moment seem inconsequential, is a true act of kindness.

"I think what the staff try to do is treat the families and the patients just like they would if they were their own family members or relatives," Ms. Furry says.

If it is true that death is an inevitable part of life, that brings little comfort when the death is that of a child, or a pregnancy is lost. When a tragedy like this occurs, the staff of UPMC Bedford Memorial show great compassion in honoring the life that came to an end too soon.

"We place a card on the patient's door with the falling leaf with a teardrop on it to let others know that the patient in this room has had a loss of a pregnancy or child," says **Polly Wells, RN**. "We have memory boxes that we fill with footprints, pictures, locks of hair, the baptism record, and vital information like the time of birth, weight, and length. We allow the parents, grandparents or other relatives to see, hold, rock, or sing to the deceased child for as long as they wish, since this is their only time to say hello and goodbye to a lifetime of hopes and dreams for this child."

At times such as these, when there is nothing to be done, it's not a caregiver's training or years of experience that are most needed, but the compassion of a

fellow human being who is there to help in any way possible.

"The very best anyone can say is, 'I am so sorry for your loss,' put our arms around them and cry with them, and let the parents do the talking while you just listen," says Ms. Wells. "We just try to do our best and hope that the family can see how much we care and are there for them."

The best way to encourage cultural competency is by sharing outstanding examples. If you or someone you work with has helped a patient with special needs, tell us about it. Email your story to inclusion@upmc.edu, and if it's chosen, the story will be included in the Cultural Competency series in Extra. By treating people the way they want to be treated, we ensure that inclusion is at the core of everything we do.

Change Up Your Commute

Consider Alternative Transportation Options

Looking for ways to save money? Interested in meeting new people? Try one of the variety of alternative transportation methods.

If you live within a reasonable distance to work, check out Bike Pittsburgh's online Bike to Work guide. If you drive in from the suburbs, you may be able to join an existing rideshare with fellow neighbors.

To find an alternative solution that best suits your needs, visit commuteinfo.org — a ridesharing resource for commuters within the 10-county Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission region — or check out the Carpool Bulletin Board on Infonet.