

Patients, families can benefit from seeking hospice care sooner.

By Kenneth Zeri, RN, MS

"If we had only called hospice sooner..." is perhaps the single most common complaint we hear about hospice care across America. A common misconception is that hospice care is only for the last few days of life. The truth is, patients and families benefit most when hospice is involved in the patient's final months.

What is hospice care?

Hospice is a philosophy of care individualized to each family's unique needs. Its goal is to relieve physical, emotional, social and spiritual suffering through the work of a dedicated team of doctors, nurses and aides, social workers, chaplains and volunteers. Hospice is not a place, and the care can be given anywhere, including on a beach.

How do patients and families benefit from hospice care?

The benefits of hospice care can include the almost immediate relief of pain or other distressing symptoms for the patient. Families experience a very real relief of some of the burdens of caregiving through the practical support of nurses, aides and volunteers who do hands on care and respite, and through the emotional support of the social workers who are truly present to the family's occasional feelings of despair. The social workers can give a voice to the unspoken fears and concerns and ease those discomforts.

But more than the practical support, the hospice benefit insurance offers some financial relief, as the hospice pays for some comfort medications and equipment. Lastly, studies show that because of hospice care, some persons with heart disease or specific cancers can live, on average, almost a month longer.



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Who is eligible for hospice care?

Hospice care is available to any person with any end stage chronic illness, such as heart or lung disease, Alzheimer's and others, or with a terminal cancer. To be eligible for hospice care, a patient's remaining life is measured in months, not years. In general, that is about six months or less. The goal of the care shifts from curing a disease to comfort care. Eligibility for each person is determined on a case by case basis.

Why do people start hospice care so late?

Changing the goals of a loved one's care from life prolonging to comfort (hospice) is a very complex and sometimes difficult choice. To some professionals and family members, hospice can represent "giving up" or losing hope. All too often, the discussions about end of life can be too painful for families, and thus avoided until the crisis is upon them. Almost 25% of all hospice patients in America have care for less than one week.

What can I do if someone I know might need hospice care?

Starting hospice services can be as simple as making a phone call. Our program, Hospice Hawai'i, has 30 years of serving our community, and can help every person answer their questions. The hospice staff is also available seven days a week to consult in hospitals, at nursing homes or in private homes to answer questions about the care.

Kenneth L. Zeri is the President and CPO of Hospice Hawai'i. For more information about Hospice Hawai'i, visit www.hospicehawaii.org or call (808) 924-9255.

Hospice care focuses on helping patients live the rest of their life.

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