THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA
REGISTER

A new American Way of Death?

By AUTUMN BRIM
2009-12-23 10:34:06

The elderly man, when he was young and strong, had been a photographer. He told Jerry Peay about it.

Then he just wanted Peay to hold his hand.

"Are you scared?"

"No. But I am going to die soon."

Then, slowly, he squeezed her hand.

Peay doesn't remember the man's name. She has worked at hospices for two decades, and has worked with so many patients that specifics — even about something as intimate as a man's last days — aren't easy to recall.

But she does remember the man's face, and the way he held her hand.

These days, Peay is coordinator of volunteer services for Companion Hospice in Orange, in charge of the people who, for no money, help the dying and their families.

And Peay's industry is booming. This year, about 1.4 million Americans will receive hospice care, and hospice experts say that number is expected to double by 2020.

One reason behind that prediction is need. America's baby boomers are aging and increasing the demand for end-of-life care, says Judi Lund Person, vice president for Regulatory and State Leadership at the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO).

But there is another, unexpected, reason, say Lund Person and others.

Hospices are *popular*.

And as a result they are changing the way Americans view death.

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We have countless euphemisms for the end of our lives. Laid to rest. Gone to be with God. Kick the bucket. Rarely, it seems, do we use the blunt but accurate — died.

But this wasn't always our attitude.

Once, death was played out in the community. Families took care of their dying. And few people, including

children, were shielded from the harsh realities of deterioration at the end of life.

The same was true for the non-physical aspects of death. Wakes happened in houses and were often somber affairs, not the upbeat celebrations of life that have come to replace traditional mourning. Cemeteries could be found in or near the center of town.

Death, if not welcome, was at least familiar.

That changed during the second half of the last century.

From World War II until the rise of hospices, in the late 1970s, death increasingly was set apart from daily life. People died in hospitals, not bedrooms. Funerals were held in funeral parlors and houses of worship, not living rooms. Cemeteries, increasingly, were placed far away from neighborhoods.

Irvine, a master-planned city of about 180,000 that was sketched out in the early 1960s, has two preplanned hospitals, vast neighborhood and business districts and bike lanes — but no cemetery.

"We have separated ourselves from death," says Father Wayne Wilson, police chaplain at the Fountain Valley Police Dept., via e-mail.

"Grandparents are put in an old folks' home and sometimes are never seen again. It is not uncommon for young adults today to have never experienced the death of a loved one.

"Because of this, the mystery of death, and afterlife, becomes disconnected to one's life experience."

Others point to an emotional disconnect.

"Dying is an elephant in the room," says Dr. JoAnne Reifsnyder, assistant professor and program director of Chronic Care Management at the Jefferson School of Population Health.

"But we are good at ignoring it."

According to Lifeintheusa.com, a Web site that educates immigrants about American culture, "(Since Americans are) insulated from disease by medical science and from the horrors of war by two great oceans, they have made death what sex once was, a subject only alluded to."

The alternative to ignoring death is fear.

"When we don't try to forget about it, death makes us nervous." Lund Person says. "It makes us afraid."

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People who work in hospices say their industry has chipped away at death's bad PR, making it again a subject of polite (if not festive) conversation.

"Whenever I tell people I work in hospice, they don't react negatively. They say, 'It made a big difference for me and my family when my mother was dying,'" says Sue Negreen, president of the California Hospice Foundation.

"It is a wonderful way of dying."

Whether or not that's true, hospice has changed the location of death.

In 1979, there were only a handful of hospice programs in America — and, that year, about 70 percent of

Americans with terminal illnesses died in hospital beds. Today, there are nearly 5,000 hospice programs, and less than 40 percent of our terminally ill die in hospitals, according to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

Hospice, which started in Britain during the 1960s, mixes medicine and emotion. By definition, hospice's mission is to keep a patient comfortable through pain medication when doctors say curative treatments aren't going to work — in short, to make their deaths easier. But hospice practitioners do everything from help family members fill out Medicare forms to show them what to look for when a death is imminent.

For patients, such help can add a small element of control to an otherwise unpredictable stage of life. Patients can't determine the where and when of their death, but they can choose who they have around them in their final days, and how lucid they'll be in their final hours.

"The families I talk to whose deceased have been in hospice handle the death of their loved one better," says Susie Searcy, a funeral arranger at Orange-based Funeral and Cremation Services.

For Norman Hawes hospice is providing an unexpected comfort.

Hawes, 82, a patient being helped by Peay's hospice, Companion Hospice, is living what he believes will be his final days at a condominium that opens up to the sand in Huntington Beach.

Life is more difficult now. He's on oxygen and tires easily. But hospice is providing a nurse who comes two to three times a week, and a volunteer who visits once a week or so.

And partly because of that, Hawes and his wife, Joann, get out to their beachfront patio almost every day.

On a recent morning, Hawes walked out onto that patio and looked for his nurse's son, a surfer, who usually waves to him from the beach. He didn't see him, but he did read the paper and talk with Joann.

"Life goes by fast," Hawes says, later, awed at the way time has flown. This is a new, challenging chapter.

Still, he's not afraid to reflect on the possibilities.

"It's been a good life," he says. "No complaints. A very good life."

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