Finding peace with hospice

By Jim Steinberg, Staff Writer

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The subject of death and dying is a difficult one for the American culture. Planning for it and dealing with it are steps that don't come easy.

"So many people don't want to think about us," said Marianne Schultz, chief operating officer for Citrus Valley Hospice and Home Health.

But those who have traveled down the final road with a loved one and a hospice organization often find peace, she said.

"It's off the radar scope," said Covina Mayor Walter Allen III of hospice. "But people should have knowledge of it early on. It makes things so much easier."

Allen lost his wife of 36 years, Patricia, in May 2009, after a 16-year battle with cancer.

Having her in Citrus Valley Hospice made the end of life journey for his wife, the family and friends more comfortable, he said.

Citrus Valley Hospice has a free-standing 10-bed facility in Covina, each with a private room and a patio.

Additionally, Citrus Valley Hospice has about 80 people on home-care hospice programs, Schultz said.

Allen praised the set-up at Citrus Valley facility for allowing the patient's room to be personalized.

Flowers can be brought, and there is a "huge living room where family members can congregate and come and go at all hours of the night," he said.

The building also has a chapel with a prayer wall, where people can write prayers, Schultz said.

While the goal of hospice is to allow people to...
die at home with dignity, if pain levels or other conditions can not be controlled in the home, the patient can be brought into one of the private rooms, she said.

Miles away, Milton Massey, 83, of San Bernardino cares for Jean, his wife of 62 years.

But he is not alone.

Members of the hospice team at Redlands Community Hospital, come in three times each week to give his wife a bath and make sure she is not developing bed sores.

Additionally, a nurse comes in to check on her vital signs and do other assessments twice a week, Milton Massey said.

Jean, 82, suffers from congestive heart failure, a condition where the heart does not pump enough blood to the body, said Dr. Regan Douty, an internal medicine specialist and medical director of Redlands Community Hospital's hospice program.

Douty said (Jean) would not have the stamina to withstand open heart surgery, and there are no other options to turn her condition around.

Since being placed on hospice care in June, Jean hasn't been hospitalized to drain a buildup of fluid in her body, a side effect of her weakened heart, her husband said.

Such hospitalizations had become very frequent prior to that point, Milton Massey said.

Jean is more calm since being in the hospice program and she has learned to let things go, including shopping and cooking the meals, her husband said.

Even going to the doctor's office made her heart race. But as part of hospice, the doctor comes to her, Milton Massey said.

People are candidates for hospice when they have been diagnosed with a terminal illness and given six months or less to live, said Gerry Smith, director of Home Health and Hospice at Redlands Community Hospital.

Patients who continue to show a decline in health status stay on hospice longer.

Although it doesn't happen often, hospice workers note that patients can stabilize and gain strength while in hospice and go on to live independently for months - or even years.

Milton Massey is fortunate that he has a neighbor, a retired licensed vocational nurse, who can give him respite while he takes a morning walk inside San Bernardino's Carousel Mall.

But for those not so lucky, hospice operations have a group of volunteers ready to help with reading, talking and listening, said Janice Brown, hospice volunteer coordinator for the Visiting Nurse Association and Hospice of Southern...
California, which has offices in both Claremont and San Bernardino.

An important part of hospice is to provide relief and support for the family, said Brown and other hospice administrators.

Sue Nice of Claremont has been a volunteer with VNA Hospice since summer as repayment for what hospice did during her husband's end of life experience.

"It was just such a positive, wonderful and helpful experience, I wanted to give back," she said.

Since completing her training program, Nice has been a companion to one person.

Although not a volunteer, Allen has also become a champion of hospice's role and an active fundraiser for Citrus Valley Hospice.

"I can't say enough about them in this situation, the family is mentally and physically taxed to the limit and in a helpless role," he said.

People who have been through hospice with a loved one often praise the nurses, social workers, volunteers and others who they have had contact with.

It takes a very special kind of person, Allen said.

Angella Waller, an RN and hospice case manager for Redlands Community Hospital, said she has enjoyed the deeper relationship she has had with patients and their families since joining the hospice group.

It is a holistic form of care, she said, where emotional and spiritual support plays a key role.

Some hospice-care workers report that they like their role in helping the whole family.

"One of the beauties of hospice is that it allows the family to be the family. Caregiving can be so difficult and frustrating. Hospice allows daughters to be the daughters again and the son to be the son time to sit at the bedside and hold mom's hand," Schultz said.

Citrus Valley Hospice is a unit of Citrus Valley Partners, which has three other facilities: Citrus Valley Medical Center Inter-Community Campus in Covina; Citrus Valley Medical Center Queen of the Valley Campus in West Covina; and Foothill Presbyterian Hospital in Glendora.

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Hospice facts

Based on the Patient Self-Determination Act of 1990, hospice providers do not deny care based on a patient's advance directive choices; patients with feeding tubes are admitted to hospice;
hospice patients may call 9-1-1;

the hospice program was designed to work with patients and their families over a six-month period;

continuous care is provided for periods of crisis until the patient's condition stabilizes;

75 percent of hospice patients have non-cancer diagnoses;

more than 35 percent of hospice patients die in seven days or less;

Less than 20 percent of dying people in the U.S. use hospice care.

SOURCE: Patty Meinhardt, director of business development, VNA & Hospice of Southern California

**Hospice volunteer training**

The VNA & Hospice of Southern California is offering free volunteer training on three nights from 5:30 to 8 at the Rancho Cucamonga Family Resource Center, 9791 Arrow Route, Rancho Cucamonga.

Tuesday: Introduction to hospice, role of the volunteer.

Wednesday: Role of the social worker, RN case manager.

Jan. 28: Spiritual dynamics, role of the hospice chaplain, grief and grieving, role of the bereavement coordinator.

For more information, call Janice Brown, hospice volunteer coordinator, VNA & Hospice of Southern California.

909-447-7375