GJ nurse finds niche with Hospice Care Center

GRAND JUNCTION, Colo. — Patti Ackley helps people who are dying and those who love them.

Ackley is a registered nurse at Hospice and Palliative Care of Western Colorado's in-patient Care Center, where patients come at the end of their lives to receive help with pain, anxiety, nausea and, along with family members, sometimes acceptance with death itself.

Ackley became an RN 28 years ago in Houston, where she worked as a cardiovascular nurse.

"I fell in love with cardiovascular medicine," Ackley said. "I loved taking care of patients with cardio problems."

But when taking care of heart patients became more specialized and more technical, Ackley said she began losing touch with the "heart of nursing."

She remembered working in a lab where nurses study computer screens while the patient lies nearby.

"It's literally 12 computer screens that you're working with," Ackley said. "It's almost like being more a computer technician working on the heart."

"One day it dawned on me I wanted to get back to what nursing was years ago," Ackley said.

Three years ago Ackley decided to be a hospice nurse.

"What I love about hospice, it recognizes the physical problems, but also a spirit, and emotions, and the family," Ackley said. "Hospice is like this whole encompassing care. They take care of every aspect of a patient."

The Hospice team includes nurses and doctors who treat a person’s physical symptoms, a chaplain who addresses spiritual issues and a social worker who helps with emotional problems.

"Sometimes it takes all three," Ackley said.

Some patients come to the Hospice Care Center for a night or two to control symptoms — sometimes more than once.

Others come there to die in a comfortable place when their families are no longer able to make the patient comfortable.

"(The Care Center) is more of an acute setting where there's a problem that needs to be dealt with now," Ackley said.

Hanging on

Patients frequently go through highly agitated, sometimes delirious states called "terminal restlessness" at the end of life, Ackley said.

"That’s hard for families to deal with at home," Ackley said. "We can control that here and make them calm and comfortable."

Oftentimes patients need to process something that happened long ago.

"In their mind they have to get all of this settled before they leave," Ackley said.

Ackley remembered one patient who had been incarcerated for 12 years for a crime he said he didn’t commit.

On his death bed he said he didn’t do it and wanted Hospice to call the sheriff so he could document that he said he did not do those things.
"He was incredibly agitated, hadn’t slept for three or four days,” Ackley said.

"A chaplain came, worked with him and wrote down all those things, and he died the next day peaceably,” Ackley said.

Another patient went back and forth between describing flowers she was seeing and talking with her daughter about various unfinished business.

When a patient is admitted to hospice care, it is expected that the patient will die within six months if the disease progresses at its normal course.

"Do they want to go on one more fishing trip? And if they do, we do everything we can to get them out on one more fishing trip,” Ackley said.

"Or maybe a patient has one more birth or graduation coming up and they really want to hang on until the event," Ackley said. “We really try and keep them comfortable until that event happens.”

Chris Abrams, 51, has congestive heart failure and became a Hospice patient in January. He is hoping to hang on long enough to see his youngest daughter graduate from high school.

"After that I would like to fish the entire summer," Abrams said, half-jokingly, clearly someone who has come to terms with his own mortality.

He and his wife, Jackie, both say they appreciate Hospice.

"The staff is available. You get a lot of attention," Jackie Abrams said.

Abrams in not an in-patient but has stayed at the Care Center a couple of times when he needed stabilization.

"If you ask for it straight, that’s what you’ll get. That’s what I want,” Abrams said.

He stopped in Wednesday to receive an acupuncture treatment. Acupuncturist Tom Lynch donates his time Wednesday afternoons treating Care Center patients.

Accepting death
Patients choose Hospice care because they’ve decided they don’t want to take aggressive hospital measures to prolong life when their illness is so serious they’re going to die anyway.

"The question is, ‘Are you really going to cure them?’” Ackley said. “Sometimes the treatment is worse than the condition.”

"All (Hospice) patients are close to the end of their lives. Some families are accepting of that, others are not,” Ackley said.

She said she helps patients and family to accept what her trained eye can see.

The goal of Hospice is to allow people to die, in peace, without pain, Ackley said.

Patients often wonder aloud what the moment of death is going to be like, Ackley said.

"I say I don’t know, I’ve never died before but I think it’s going to be good,” Ackley said.

That’s because many of her patients describe seeing beautiful scenery when approaching death, Ackley said.

Some patients have told her they’re ready to go. Others she tells “it’s OK to go.”

One man wanted the screens off the window – he knew he would leave the body and he wanted his “energy” to be able to get out, Ackley said.

“So we took the screens off.”

Ackley keeps a sort of journal of the different things patients and their families say — things she wants to remember.

Not long ago, Ackley went into a room where a wife had been sitting for about 30 minutes holding the hand of her husband who had just died.

"I went back in, put my arm around her and asked, ‘Are you OK?’ And she said, ‘Yeah, we’re just making our plans, giving each other instructions of what we’re going to do until we see each other again.’”

Nursing award
Ackley works with 20 other RNs at the Care Center, as well as three physicians, a nurse practitioner and two new RN graduate interns.

Ackley was recently honored with the Clinical Care Award from the Colorado Nurses Association at the Western Slope Nightingale Gala held in Grand Junction March 21.

Florence Nightingale was a 19th century nursing pioneer who epitomized the art of helping people toward their optimal health.

"I have witnessed Patti as a patient advocate, as a skilled clinician and as an excellent teacher and mentor,” said Terri Walter of Hospice, who nominated Ackley for the award.

Ackley has served on numerous community boards such as Girls on the Run and the Mesa County Medical Society Alliance.

In her spare time she said she loves to fly fish on top of the Mesa, on the Gunnison River and near Crested Butte. Next month she’s planning to fish the Colorado River below Glen Canyon dam.

"Fly fishing is a great way to restore balance to my life,” Ackley said. “You have to have something where
you can keep your own emotions healthy.

“The outdoors does that for me.”

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