



Hospice still not well understood by public

By JOHN EBY / Dowagiac Daily News

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Her dad is the reason Ann Hill joined Cass County Hospice 20 years ago.

Daniel O'Connell, founder of O'Connell's restaurants, died alone in a large Chicago hospital at 9 p. m. - an hour after she was shooed out of his room when visiting hours ended at 8.

"Although my dad never had hospice care, my mother died a year ago May 14 at our home. (Jane Swift O'Connell, 91) died with us. The staff came in. Both my brothers came in from out of town. One's from Canada, the other's from Chicago. They knew I worked in this area for many years, but had no idea. Nobody wanted to ask me about what I did."

Her brother, Michael O'Connell, came away so impressed he intended to become a volunteer.

"Families tell families," she said.

"I can sit and tell you all our services and give you brochures, but until you've experienced it or you know someone who has, that really hits home."

Hill, whose son just returned safely from Afghanistan, used a program to Dowagiac Rotary Club Thursday noon at Elks Lodge 889 to clear up several "misconceptions" about hospice care.

"Anyone can make a referral," Hill said. "Hospice is not just for cancer. It's for all end-term diseases," from heart disease and diabetes to dementia and Alzheimer's.

Hospice care since 1982 has been a Medicare benefit, though "hardly anybody knows about it," she said. "If you're 65 or over, that benefit pays for all the services provided by Hospice - all the medication, all the equipment needed in a home, the nursing visits, the chaplain, the medical director, our social worker and 60 volunteers."

Hospice serves about 80 people per year between Cass and Van Buren counties from its Decatur office, which is a division of Hospice Care of Southwest Michigan in Kalamazoo.

Rose Arbor is a 16-bed residential facility. "People from Cass County go up there," she said. "Let

me say that my dream is that we will have one here in Dowagiac someday and be able to serve the community directly. Space is a big divider. I remember when we moved from our little office behind the hospital to Decatur to better serve our clients in both counties because response time is very important. It was a long way for nurses to drive from Dowagiac to Gobles. Volunteers had a difficult time with that. I myself feel that way, although Decatur is extremely close and extremely supportive of Hospice. But I think we need a residence here, in this county, to serve our people here. They can't stay at home but they do not want to be in nursing homes."

More than those 80 people, Hospice offers 13-month bereavement counseling to families to get through "all those firsts" of birthdays and holidays.

Another important thing to remember is that all hospices are not alike, Hill said. "We have been non-profit for 20 years. Our money must go back into the care of our clients. That is our priority. We reinforce, listening to them on how they want to spend their time. We see what we can do to make those months, weeks, days valuable and as pain-free as possible using the resources of a community the social worker puts together. We offer a smorgasbord of services that people don't even know about."

She spoke as the guest of David Cook, who said, "Blessed are the people like Ann who, in my words, are there to hold our hands through the scary part."

"When the word hospice is mentioned, there is a still in the room," she said. "We, in our society, do not want to look at the end of life. With the Terri Schiavo case, many millions of people are beginning to take some steps toward planning for that inevitable event. It need not be done in loneliness, pain and discomfort. That has really spurred people on for the last 20 years here in Cass County ... With our incredible technology, we have been robbed, in many, many ways, of the way human beings have cared for each other for millenniums - especially at that last time, surrounded by family and making that choice of where they want to die.

"Our focus is to take care of people at home. However, we also take care of people in adult foster care, in nursing homes throughout the area - wherever someone calls their home once we're invited. Our goal is comfort."

What some might decree "depressing work" depends "on your philosophy of life and death," Hill said. "We all are going to die. If you have some comfort with that, and realize how important it is to people to have support, it's a joy to do this work. It's a joy to work with people at a private time of life when hardly anybody else gets in, we are invited in and we make dear friends. We are taught how to live. It's an ongoing education for us, as well. That's part of the richness of it."

However, Hill said, "If you're under 65, that's a problem. So many people of this community don't have medical insurance that they can draw on. That's why we do fundraisers. That's why Take Off with Hospice is so marvelous. We care for everyone who needs our help. We turn no one away. Our mission is to serve. We're non-profit. We're nurtured by United Way in Cass County. The people of this county have been very generous. But I'm not here to ask you to play golf with us June 23. I'm asking you to tell other people that there's help. Families don't have to do it alone."

Medicare monitors hospice care, "so we have to keep very good records," she said. "We evaluate all of our clients on a regular basis to make sure they're declining. We discharge people from hospice" once their medications are properly adjusted and they feel better.

"We do nothing to hasten death," Hill said, "and nothing to avert it. A lot of people think that we espouse Kevorkian. That is not our philosophy. We believe that with the very, very fine medicine and technology, we can help with their pain, discomfort and isolation. Home health aides get the closest and provide the most wonderfully loving care. The chaplain is non-denominational because we espouse no religion. Everybody has their own spiritual life. People are fiercely independent and they're so afraid that somehow they're going to get pushed into a particular mode of believing or that they must be saved. There's a lot of timidity in families about a chaplain coming in, but we're there for them - not our agenda. The physician directs the care, but our medical director oversees it. The volunteers are probably the happiest part of my job. Today I have 10 volunteers getting their certificates after five weeks" of training. "That's my great joy. These are people from all walks of life."

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