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Tender loving hospice care in the comfort of home

By Volt Contreras

Inquirer

Last updated 01:06am (Mla time) 09/23/2007

MANILA, Philippines -- Human rights that are worth dying for should also include the “rights of the dying” to spend their last days in comfort and minimal pain.

This is the conviction that drives hospice care volunteers Asuncion Kalalo, a lawyer, and Elisa Allado, a doctor, to set aside their Sunday mornings to visit the homes of the terminally ill in depressed areas south of Manila.

They raise funds and gather donations to provide patients with free morphine; lend them wheelchairs, oxygen tanks and nebulizers, and arrange ambulance services, among other things. They also provide psychological and family counseling, as well as prayers.

They are stepping up their campaign this week as the Philippines plays host to the 7th Asia Pacific Hospice Conference at Sofitel Philippine Plaza Hotel from Sept. 27 to 29.

Early this month, for instance, the hospice volunteers paid a visit to “Lyn,” 45, a single mother of two, to check on her supply of medication for her numbing headaches.

“They are like angels,” Lyn, who was diagnosed with peripheral nerve sheath cancer in 2000, said of her weekly well-wishers.

But perhaps more importantly, such visits assure her anxious family that they are not alone in that small, one-story apartment in Bayanan, Muntinlupa City, waiting for the inevitable.

Before leaving, the two women “pray over” Lyn, her bed now moved to the living area, which provides better ventilation and the quickest dash to the front door in case of an emergency. Heavy oxygen tanks and a small table for her medicines are within her reach.

“Di ko alam kung saan kami populutin kung wala sila (I don’t know where we would be without them),” said the former lounge singer, whose condition had long forced her son and daughter, now both in their 20s, to quit school and look for work.

Kalalo and Allado, who both belong to a church-based foundation in Alabang, can be counted among the country’s leading advocates of hospice care—the holistic, preferably home-based services given to patients for whom a cure is no longer possible.

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"When nothing else can be done for patients, the goal is to manage their pain and their symptoms, to surround them with loved ones and give them the highest possible quality of life in their remaining days," said Kalalo, president of the National Hospice Council of the Philippines (NHCP).

The two women often make their rounds together, sometimes with a nurse and other volunteers from their parish in tow. They have a dual mission: To extend palliative care to the patients, and prepare their families for the impending loss.

Formed in 1994, NHCP is an umbrella group now composed of 24 member-organizations and staffed by 520 care providers nationwide.

"Hospi," as their services are fondly referred to, is mainly about relieving the patient of the day's pain and tomorrow's worries. Aside from easing the physical suffering, it also involves taking the patient's spirit by the hand through prayer and counseling before it wallows in fear, guilt or self-pity.

Hence, Kalalo's local group, the Ayala-Alabang Hospice Care Foundation Inc., also arranges regular home visits by a priest and a small group of parishioners.

Such interventions are deemed crucial, especially if the patient has started entertaining dark notions of being "punished" by God or hounded by "bad karma," said Allado, who serves as the foundation's home care physician.

Hospice caregivers also try to create an atmosphere where the patient and his family can resolve lingering "issues"—like marital spats, strained relations with children or siblings or disputes over property—lest these conflicts weigh heavily on the patient, Allado explained.

The care can extend to postmortem concerns. "We talk about burial plans, wills and the care of the children," she said.

Lyn, for instance, has already prepared a set of "advanced directives" detailing how she wishes to finally go: She wants it to be in a hospital, as painless as possible—and "no more tubes."

Kalalo conceded that most Filipino families still unfamiliar with hospice care may tend to have a "never-give-up" attitude and view it as a form of surrender, a sign of their lack of faith.

Many feel "guilty" about bringing the patient home from the hospital for good, and would rather subject him or her to further medical procedures—some quite invasive and stressful—even after being told of their futility.

"They'd rather make the patient stay at the hospital in the belief that they are doing him a favor," she said. "But in fact they may be just trying to ease their own consciences by showing that they have done everything possible."

The foundation has helped over 250 families overcome such dilemmas, she reported. At present, it is attending to eight indigent patients in the Muntinlupa, Parañaque, and Las Piñas areas.

Last year, they managed to find a donor for a hospital bed and had it delivered to the home of one of their patients, 58-year-old "Flor" of Barangay Putatan also in Muntinlupa.

The adjustable bed allows "Flor," afflicted with advanced-stage breast cancer, to lie down in a position that eases the pain in her back and legs. Regular doses of morphine have also made all the difference for this mother of five, who manages to stand up and move around the house.

She can do simple chores and tend to the family's sari-sari store. A good cook and one-time businesswoman, she even has the energy to entertain neighbors who would come over to consult her about certain recipes or how to process meat into native sausages or longaniza.

Last New Year's Eve, she was able to join the revelry by marveling at the fireworks from her bedroom window. "Without 'hospi' I probably would not have gone this far," she said, recalling that a doctor at the Philippine General Hospital had warned her that she may not last till the end of 2006.

About 300 foreign guests and 1,000 local delegates are expected to attend the international conference this week to share the latest developments and practices in hospice care.

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