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Florence Wald, leader in US hospice, dies at 91

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20081115/obit-wald/
HARTFORD, Conn. — Florence Wald, a former Yale nursing dean whose interest in compassionate care led her to launch the first U.S. hospice program, has died. She was 91.

Her daughter, Shari Vogler, said Saturday that Wald died Nov. 8 of natural causes at her Branford home. A hospice volunteer was by her side to the end, Vogler said.

Wald was dean of the Yale University School of Nursing in the 1960s when she updated its curriculum to include a stronger focus on comfort for dying patients and their families.

Wald's passion for hospice was sparked when she heard a lecture by the founder of St. Christopher's Hospice in London. She later left Yale to study at that center.

She returned to organize Connecticut Hospice in 1974 in Branford, widely accepted to be the first U.S. hospice program. Her husband and children also became deeply involved in the hospice movement, Vogler said.

"It was a family affair," said Vogler, a nurse and trained hospice worker. "My mother was interested in the entire span of life, from birth through death, and she shared everything she was interested in with us all the way along the way."

Wald's recent work included efforts to bring more hospice care to U.S. prisons and train inmates as hospice volunteers.

Story continues below

Wald was born in New York and graduated from Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1938 before receiving her master's degree in nursing from Yale in 1941. She was a nurse, research assistant and teacher before becoming dean of Yale's College of Nursing in 1959.

The hospice movement, which includes more than 3,200 programs nationwide, focuses on providing care for terminally ill patients and their families.

Wald has said that before hospice, many physicians were so focused on the evolving technology of medicine that their attention to patients' needs was being eroded.
"It was difficult for them to give up the treatment even when they saw the patient was going down, down, down and suffering more, more, more," she told The Associated Press at her 1998 induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

"There are times when the symptoms can't be controlled, and the physician and nurses and others need to meet that patient and let the patient decide for themselves what they want," Wald said.

Hospice gained more use and attention after Congress ordered Medicare in 1982 to start paying for the service. About 900,000 patients currently receive services each year from U.S. hospice programs.

"Our mother was passionate that all people should be treated as important," said Wald's son, Joel Wald, adding she also was interested in civil rights and the rights of women, patients and veterans. "We're very fortunate to have had a mother who touched so many lives."

Wald was honored in a memorial service at Yale on Wednesday, Vogler said.

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