

US hospice industry booms as more opt to manage their death

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Long stigmatized and associated with a slow, miserable death, hospice care in the United States has grown into a 10-billion-dollar industry in the last decade as more Americans opt to manage the end of their lives.

"People nowadays are much more interested in options available to them and more people are recognizing the value of hospice care," Jon Radulovic, spokesman for the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO), told AFP.

According to data compiled by the NHPCO, 1.06 million people sought care at 3,600 hospice facilities in the United States in 2004, an increase of 110,000 people in just one year's time. In 1974, one hospice facility operated in the United States compared to 1,545 in 1985.

Radulovic said 2005 statistics due out in coming months are also expected to show a marked increase.

"I would estimate there are 4,100 facilities now," he said.

Health professionals say people's attitude toward hospice, which provides care to the terminally ill, has been changing over the years as more Americans from the baby-boom generation near retirement and face end-of-life choices.

They say in a country obsessed with medical advances and where many equate death with failure, there is also growing awareness among terminally ill patients that they have other options than to die in a hospital bed hooked to life support.

"There is a more realistic understanding of what is possible and some people are stopping at one point and focusing on the quality of life," Radulovic said. "There are more people in need and more people are recognizing the value of hospice care which is not about giving up but about high-quality care."

One case that brought palliative care to the forefront in the United States last year was that of Terri Schiavo, a brain-damaged woman who became caught in the middle of a legal battle over the right to die that riveted the nation.

"The Terri Schiavo case was a focal point for people to really think about 'well have I made my wishes known? Have I taken the time to make sure my loved ones know what I would want if I were unable to speak for myself?'," said Audrianne Schneider, spokesman for Vista Care, an Arizona-based hospice care provider that operates in 14 states.

"It's a huge cultural shift in the way we look at end of life."

Still, Schneider said although more people are becoming aware of hospice care in the United States, only one in

three eligible for such care actually receive it and the medical profession has yet to fully embrace that option for the terminally ill.

"A lot of people still don't realize that hospice care is an option and that it's covered by Medicare (government health insurance) and financial institutions," she said. "And doctors are still looking for ways to treat a patient.

"But I think we're getting there and I hope people come to realize that hospice is an option to have the best of life for them or their loved one." — AFP

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