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Deciding on hospice

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By: CNN

Many American cancer patients in the final stage of life end up receiving hospice care, but not all of them benefit.

The decision for hospice is one that no family wants to make, but experts say deciding just when a loved one needs hospice care is a decision that families must face.

"There is an appropriate time to be treating patients aggressively, but there is also a time to stop," Dr. Craig Earle of Harvard Medical School said.

And that's the time that hospice care can take over and treat them symptoms as opposed to the illness.

Earle wrote a study on trends in end-of-life cancer treatment.

"We found that over the course of the 1990s patients were receiving increasing aggressive care in many dimensions; they were likely to still be receiving chemotherapy up until 14 days before death," Earle said.

At that point it's too late for patients to benefit from hospice, Earle said. Part of the problem is that new cancer drugs offer false hope for survival and some oncologists overestimate a patient's prognosis.

Doctors need to do a better job preparing families for the inevitable, Earle said.

"Continuing with treatment is sometimes a form of denial, a way of not dealing with the issues around mortality and end of life," he said.

Improving the quality of a patient's life, not necessarily the length, is what doctors need to focus on, he said.

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