

What does home hospice care mean?

By Roxanne Allen

Former President Jimmy Carter's decision to start home hospice has many Americans wondering just what that means. This brings much needed attention to this crucial part of health care. Hospice care is an essential and compassionate part of medicine. Patients and their families benefit from hospice and more could benefit if they were aware of this care option.

Hospice is a special way of caring for people with a terminal illness, their families and their caregivers. Hospice care shifts to managing symptoms, the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the people. Hospice delivers comfort care and helps the patient have the highest possible quality of life.

President Carter is 98 years old, but age is not a factor in determining eligibility for hospice care. Generally, patients eligible for hospice care have received an estimate from their medical provider that they may have less than six months to live.

Hospice allows patients to choose to stay at home rather than in a hospital in their last months of life. The hospice team includes a physician, nurses, social workers, chaplains and other professionals. They visit the patient's home as needed and support the family or friends who are the patient's primary caregivers.

The patient receives medication to relieve pain and control other symptoms. Hospice patients have chosen to discontinue invasive tests, treatments and medications designed to cure illness. For example, a cancer patient in hospice would no longer receive chemotherapy. Hospice care aims at alleviating suffering and improve quality of life.

The hospice patient or his legal representative may choose to discontinue hospice at any time if they desire more aggressive care or treatments.

Medicare and Medicaid cover home hospice care. Most private insurance plans also cover home hospice.

Hospice can help families understand what physical changes to expect as their loved one nears death. When the patient is no longer able to speak, hospice professionals can help caregivers assess whether the loved one is experiencing pain or other distress.

Sometimes hospice support is enough to help people remain in their familiar place until death. When that is not possible, the hospice team can help families sort through other living options. The RiverStone Health Hospice Home in Billings provides 24/7 nursing care for patients who cannot stay in their own homes.

Hospice offers bereavement support to families and caregivers from the time of enrollment and throughout the year after the loved one's death. This may include grief support groups, phone calls to check on survivors and other compassionate communication.

As President Carter receives hospice care at his home in Plains, Ga., people in Yellowstone County also are receiving this professional, end-of-life support. Hospice provides people with a comforting choice about how and where they will live their last days.

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