

Understanding hospice

By Connie Matter, RN, BS

What is Hospice? Historically, it was a centuries-old concept of hospitality offered to weary and sick travelers on long journeys. Today, we understand hospice in a different way. The modern concept of hospice was founded in south London in 1967 by Dame Cicely Saunders. She was the first to apply the term “hospice” to the special care provided to patients with a life-limiting diagnosis.

Saunders’ quest “to do something about pain” at the end of life led to the birth of the hospice concept. When she realized “pain wasn’t only physical, but could be psychological, social, and/or spiritual,” she identified the essence of hospice care. She is quoted as saying, “I’d just turn the lights out and let the patients speak. This gave a voice to the patients, and they are the real founders of the hospice movement.”

Thanks to Saunders, hospice is the term we now use for a health care approach that is designed to support the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of patients and their families who are facing life-limiting illnesses. Hospice care brings comfort, dignity, and support to help patients live every moment of their life to the fullest. It also reaches out to provide support for the family and friends who love and care for them.

Hospice care is a physician-directed, interdisciplinary approach to patient care that includes nurses, home health aides, social workers, bereavement staff, chaplains, and

trained volunteers. The hospice team, along with the family, develops the plan of care and manages the pain and symptoms. They work together with the patient and family to address all aspects of the patient’s care needs. They are also advocates for the patient and their family. Hospice care also extends to provide bereavement care and counseling for up to 13 months after the loss of a loved one.

Here are a few other common questions about hospice care:

Where does hospice care take place? It takes place wherever the person in need calls home. In most cases, hospice care is delivered in the home, but it can be provided in a long term care facility, assisted living, hospital or in a hospice residence.

How is hospice paid for? Hospice care is typically paid for by the Medicare hospice benefit, Medicaid hospice benefit, and most private insurers include at least some hospice coverage. If a patient does not have Medicaid or private insurance, hospice will work with the person, and their family, to ensure services are provided. It is important to note that hospice service is available regardless of one’s ability to pay.

What are the hospice admission criteria? In general, the person must have a life-limiting illness with a prognosis of 6 months or less if the disease takes its normal course. They must live in the service area of the chosen hospice and consent to accept services.



Making the decision to seek hospice care can be a fearful and painful process. However, when one makes the decision to accept this concept of care, they will find caring professionals committed to being there for them and their loved ones. Hospice does not offer the possibility of cure or recovery, but seeks to provide support and hope.

Hospice care is described very eloquently by a family member whose father received hospice care: “You can be very proud of the work you do. Your kindness and compassion are something to cherish. Through this experience, I know the true meaning of caring.” ❁

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Ten Facts about Hospice Care You may not Know

Some people mistakenly think hospice care is just about dying... that hospice is the place you call when there’s nothing more that can be done. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hospice helps patients and families focus on living.

1. Hospice is not a place; it’s high-quality medical care that helps the patient and family caregivers focus on comfort and quality of life.
2. Hospice is paid for by Medicare, Medicaid, most insurance plans, HMOs, and managed care plans. Fear of costs should never prevent a person from accessing hospice care.
3. Hospice serves anyone with a life-limiting illness, regardless of age or type of illness.
4. Hospice serves people of all backgrounds and traditions; the core values of hospice—allowing the patient to be with family, including spiritual and emotional support, treating pain—reaches across all cultures.
5. Research has shown that the majority of Americans would prefer to be at home at the end of life’s journey—hospice makes this possible for most people.
6. Hospice serves people living in long term care facilities and assisted living facilities.
7. Hospice patients and families can receive care for six months or longer.
8. A person may keep his or her referring physician involved while receiving hospice care.
9. Hospice offers grief and bereavement services to family members and the community.
10. To get the most out of what hospice offers, it’s better to have care for more than just a few days.

The best time to learn about hospice is before someone in your family is facing a healthcare crisis.

This information is provided by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization and Hospice Alliance, Inc. For more information, visit www.hospicealliance.org.