

Saying goodbye with dignity, grace

June 15 2011

When Kathleen Coleman of Oak Park was first diagnosed with cardiac disease at the age of 65, her husband and adult children united with her to wage war on the illness.

”The Coleman family is very close, and we battled the disease for several years, trying many different specialists,” said Dr. Margaret McMahon, of Loyola University Health System at Gottlieb Memorial Hospital. Every avenue of recovery was explored, but last December they received news they felt unprepared for.

“I recommended [hospice](#) care, knowing we had exhausted our options and that Kathleen was growing weak,” McMahon said.

The Coleman family was not surprised by the news but felt uncertain about how to begin the final journey.

“For the past several years, we had spent all of our energy and resources in finding cures to keep Mother alive. It was a new way of thinking to apply the same dedication and energy to letting her go,” said Regina Dienberg. Along with her father, Thomas, and her two sisters, Dienberg accepted Dr. McMahon’s recommendation and met with Gottlieb’s Home Health & Hospice Department.

“Many people think that hospice means all care stops and everyone gives up. But that is far from the truth,” said Shirley Coakley, RN, hospice nurse. “Hospice means our focus is now the patient’s comfort, making sure they are not in pain, that they feel cared for and nurtured.”

Coakley also emphasized that hospice focuses on the family. “We try and ease all burdens so the patient and loved ones can spend quality time together – sharing happy memories, having meaningful conversations and creating calm and peace,” said Coakley, who has served in hospice care for 14 of her 35 years in nursing.

“The hospice staff members provided ‘from-the-heart’ attention and comfort,” Dienberg said. “Nothing can prepare you for losing a loved one, but the guidance and support from a group of people who truly cared about my mother helped my family get through one of the toughest times of our life.”

Some families choose to bring the patient home and hospice staff will help care for them there. The Coleman family, however, chose to have their mother remain at Gottlieb for end-of-life care.

“Many like the Colemans feel that the patient will be more comfortable staying in a medical environment, hoping to disturb the patient as little as possible,” Coakley said. Hospital staffers provide around-the-clock care, which includes grooming, feeding and administering pain medication.

“Hospice should provide five important elements of care,” Coakley said. She and the Gottlieb hospice staff provide:

1. Patient care for the terminally ill and family supportive care
2. An individualized care plan
3. Pain management
4. Symptom control
5. Grief support

Hospice care members also serve as experienced guides and compassionate caretakers for the patient's family.

“We help the patient and loved ones celebrate each moment of life fully and later we help them through each step of the grieving process,” Coakley said.

In addition to medical staff, Gottlieb hospice offers spiritual counseling by specially trained chaplains throughout the experience.

“Our chaplains regularly minister to the family and to the patient. We also hold special memorial services for our patients that are attended by our staff and we all share personal memories of the loved one,” Coakley said. “Gottlieb hospice also offers grief support sessions to bring families together with others and offers counseling to move forward.”

Kathleen Coleman passed away Dec. 11, 2010. The Colemans feel a sense of peace and closure.

“My family cannot thank Gottlieb enough for taking the burden off us so we could enjoy her last few days reminiscing about the good times we had over the years, visiting with our [family](#) and friends and helping us to say our goodbyes,” Dienberg said. “The entire Gottlieb community never gave up on my mother, despite her health ailments, and everyone fought to keep her comfortable up to the very end.”

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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