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using puppetry in hospice

BY NICKY McHUGH

HOW CONNECTICUT'S MASONICARE
USES EXPRESSIVE PUPPETRY TO
BREAK DOWN BARRIERS IN
TERMINALLY ILL PATIENTS

Making a caring connection with hospice patients is not always easy — especially when patients have dementia or terminal illnesses.

"When you meet people at the end of life, there is a certain nobility to that. Many of us who work in hospice find that inspiring," explained Timothy Boon, vice president of Hospice and Palliative Care of Connecticut's VNA, an affiliate of Masonicare.

Located in Wallingford, CT, Masonicare is the largest not-for-profit organization caring for the elderly in the state and serves 1,500 seniors in facilities each day. The hospice division has seen much success using non-traditional, creative therapies to treat terminally ill patients.

One of these creative techniques is expressive puppetry — a unique therapy that the organization is using to connect with hospice patients on a deeply personal level.

CARING FOR PEOPLE

Originally, hospice programs were established to care for terminally ill patients diagnosed with cancer, and many in the medical community still think of hospice as an oncology program. However, recent trends suggest that hospice care is changing.

In 1992, 76 percent of all new hospice enrollees were diagnosed with cancer. By 1998, that percentage had dropped to 57 percent (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000).

Today, Masonicare's hospice program treats patients with cancer, Alzheimer's, heart disease and Parkinson's, as well as patients with neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis and dementia.



PUPPY LOVE: Marge Tolland works closely with Masonicare's hospice nurses to incorporate expressive puppetry as a treatment option in patient care. Here, she awakens the spirit within a puppy puppet.

In addition to providing symptom management and personal care for patients, hospice nurses also provide support to patients' families.

BEYOND MEDICATION

Expressive therapies — arts therapy, massage, reiki, music therapy and guided imagery — have traditionally been an important component of hospice care. They provide an opportunity for expression, communication, relaxation, stimulation and pain relief.

Yet Masonicare's hospice teams were discovering that the psychosocial services of hospice, while often of great comfort ▶

puppetryinhospice

to caregivers and loved ones, are frequently unable to penetrate the thick barriers of severe dementia or depression to improve the emotional and spiritual quality of life for patients.

"We needed to find a way to truly reach those patients," said Boon. "We were very open to trying new techniques, and this led us to develop a program called expressive puppetry."

Expressive puppetry as a modality is the purposeful, skillful use of specific puppets that are meaningful to the patient. Whether provided as an adjunct or alternative to traditional treatments, it is particularly useful for patients who are unable to engage due to cognitive limitations.

EXPLORING EMOTIONS

The puppetry program provides a different approach to help patients explore emotions that can be too painful or overwhelming to talk about openly.

Patti Granzen, RN, who leads the CT VNA Hospice team in Shelton, CT, explains that expressive puppetry works so well because it is not threatening to the patient. It also provides avenues for communication that traditional expressive therapies cannot.

"Even for patients with severe dementia, we find that the puppets can break through," she said. "Puppets offer unconditional love and tap into people's roots at a very fundamental level so that people begin to share stories. Sometimes the puppets are just very nurturing."

REACHING PATIENTS

Marge Tolland, an educator by profession, helped Masonicare initiate the expressive puppetry program. She recounted one early success story.

"Two years ago, I had a patient who was severely depressed," Tolland said. "Every week for a year I would try different methodologies to try to reach her, but she was bed-ridden, losing weight and non-verbal. I almost took myself off the case because I felt I was unable to reach her."

"One day, I tried my black lab puppy puppet, and for the first time I noticed a flicker in her eyes. I moved in closer with the puppy and nuzzled her face. During the next few weeks she started opening up and we were able to talk — patient to puppet."

Tolland learned that as a young child, the patient had owned a black lab puppy. By remembering those good times in her



FURRY FRIENDS: Nursing teams at Masonicare's hospice division found adding expressive puppetry to the range of treatment options improved the success of reaching patients who are traditionally difficult to communicate with. Here, Kinsha Williams-Davis, RN, (left) and Marge Tolland (right) discuss an approach to care using puppets.

mind, the patient was able to feel safe and begin to open up.

"That's how the puppets work — they tap into a past joy and, in that sense, fill a void," Tolland said. "The puppet allowed her to share her story, and in sharing her story she shared her grief. This helped her heal."

NOT CHILD'S PLAY

Masonicare credits the success of the expressive puppetry program in large part to the teamwork of the various professionals caring for the patient.

"We recognized that the reason nurses enter this profession is to make a difference, to help people and to make a positive impact on individuals and their community in some way," Boon said.

Because hospice can be a challenging environment, Masonicare developed a team-based approach that focuses on treating the individual, not the disease.

"Treatments are aimed at providing comfort, rather than prolonging life,"

Boon said. "It's often very difficult to talk about end-of-life issues, and many people don't get the chance to discuss this honestly."

CT VNA's hospice program deploys teams of nurses, home health aides, social workers, spiritual counselors, bereavement counselors, dietitians, pharmacists and other professionals to help patients have a meaningful experience at the end of their life.

"Hospice is really about living, not dying," explains Boon. "Our goal in establishing expressive puppetry as one of our practices was to help the patient and the caregiver work through the pain and anguish to acknowledge and embrace the physical, emotional and spiritual issues associated with death."

"In working through this process, you can bring about peace." ■

Nicky McHugh is a freelance writer and principal of her own public relations firm based in Connecticut.