

Hospice and Palliative Care: A Vital Choice for Quality of Life

By Priya Jayadev

Hospice and palliative care are specialized medical approaches focused on supporting individuals living with serious, life-limiting illnesses. These types of care prioritize comfort, quality of life—for both patients and their loved ones—and effective symptom management. Care is delivered by an interdisciplinary team that addresses not just physical needs, but also emotional, social, spiritual, and practical concerns.

Choosing hospice or palliative care is not “giving up” and does not hasten death. This care is about enhancing life, no matter how much time remains.

Improving Lives

Palliative care is for anyone with a diagnosis of a serious illness. It can be provided alongside curative treatments and is designed to ease symptoms, reduce stress, and support emotional and spiritual well-being. The word “palliative” comes from the Latin *pallium*, meaning “cloak,” symbolizing how this care helps manage the burdens of illness rather than cure the disease itself.

Hospice care is a specific type of palliative care offered near the end of life. Hospice care is generally appropriate when the answer to the question “would you be surprised if this patient died within six months?” is “no.” This answer does not mean that the patient will die within six months, just that it is a possible outcome with the normal progression of the patient’s illness.

Hospice care focuses on comfort, dignity, and making the most of the time remaining. Patients who are in hospice generally do not pursue curative treatment. In fact, Medicare stipulates that patients pursuing hospice care with Medicare-funding must give up curative therapies for the disease that qualifies them as “hospice appropriate.”

More Than Medicine: A Holistic Approach

Studies show that patients receiving hospice or palliative care often experience better quality of life. Consideration of all aspects of the patient’s life and care of both their non-medical and medical needs eases stress, decreases anxiety and depression, and provides significant relief. Focus on symptom management relieves pain and mitigates discomfort, improving physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Education about the patient’s disease and likely outcome helps inform and support decision-making about treatments and therapies.

Family and caregivers also benefit from the provision of this type of holistic care. Caregiver education equips them with strategies for everyday care of the patient. Respite care provides much needed relief from the demands of caregiving. Emotional support provides a venue to discuss concerns and vocalize frustrations. Information and education help with getting affairs in order.

Options in Clallam County

Unlike many rural communities across the U.S., Clallam County is not in a “hospice desert.” We are fortunate that we have two hospice providers in our area. Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County (VHOCC) is the local, independent hospice that is exempt from Medicare licensure. Assured Hospice is a Medicare-certified hospice that is the regional arm of United Health Group’s Optum health services division.

VHOCC offers a unique model of hospice and palliative care that is available through only a handful of hospices in the U.S. Due to the exemption from Medicare licensure, VHOCC has the freedom to provide palliative care to patients with a life expectancy longer than 6 months. Patients can also pursue curative treatment for their life-limiting illness, if appropriate for achieving their goals (e.g. to be able to go on a trip or to live long enough to attend a family gathering).

In Medicare-funded hospices, the makeup of the palliative/hospice interdisciplinary team includes nurses, physicians, nursing aides, social workers, spiritual counselors, therapists, dietitians, counselors, and a few volunteers. In contrast, VHOCC’s care team comprises professional nurses and nurse’s aides with support from an extensive pool of experienced volunteers who provide respite care and emotional, spiritual, grief, and bereavement support. The primary care provider, home health services, therapeutic specialists, and other medical professionals who were already part of the patient’s care team prior to hospice admission, partner with VHOCC in caring for the patient.

Medicare-funded hospices have a standardized model where the hospice provider assumes full responsibility for managing medical care, prescriptions, and treatment decisions. In contrast, VHOCC requests medication prescriptions through the patient’s providers to be filled as any non-hospice prescription would be filled for that patient. There is a greater reliance on partner providers and pharmacies with the VHOCC model.

Know Your Choices

End-of-life care is deeply personal. Having access to multiple models means individuals and families in Clallam County can choose the path that aligns with their values, priorities, and medical needs.

Before deciding what path to follow, take time to explore your options, ask questions, and consider what matters most. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach—and fortunately, in Clallam County, there doesn’t have to be.

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