

Schueth, HospiceCare help people cope with death

Nonprofit makes end of life more comfortable for those facing terminal illnesses

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BOULDER - Most people don't like to talk or think about death - let alone face it on a daily basis.

Started in 1976 as a progressive, grassroots effort to provide a better way for people to die, HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties was one of the first hospice-care programs in the country and the first in Colorado.

Darla Schueth, HospiceCare's executive director, is this year's winner of the Boulder County Business Report's Health-Care Heroes Community Service Award.

In 2007 alone the program served 1,200 patients facing the end of life.

Schueth said the nonprofit health-care organization takes care of the basics of dying, including managing the pain and symptoms of terminal illness. Once those are handled, the real work of hospice care begins, including helping people take care of life's business, find spiritual comfort and peace, and help celebrate and complete their lives.

"This isn't hard work; it's very life-affirming," Schueth said. "The hardest part of our work is people coming to us with such short lengths of stay as opposed to the opportunity to get to know people."

Schueth said about 45 percent of patients treated through HospiceCare are with the program less than seven days, making it difficult to support patients in a meaningful way through hospice rather in a "death-ICU" environment.

"When you're working with people who are in the end stages of life, all the game faces come off," Schueth said. "And they get real. They know what's really meaningful in life. They're not worried about the stuff you and I are worried about. That's the juice that drives us."

David Gehant, chief executive officer of Boulder Community Hospital, nominated Schueth for her work providing compassionate end-of-life care and efforts to educate the community. As a board member, Gehant said he is privy to the outstanding results the program has produced and the high level of confidence it inspires in area physicians.

After taking care of patients, sometimes for years, physicians need to trust the quality of care and communication offered by a hospice program, Gehant said. "That level of assurance is earned with consistently high performance. It's something that physicians see and is reinforced each time they refer a patient."

Gehant said the patient-centered staff at HospiceCare "really stand out not only as highly qualified but very compassionate" and that their integrity and dedication stem from Schueth's leadership role.

"Darla is both altruistic and realistic," Gehant said. "Her ability shines through because she's able to assemble those necessary resources and deliver them at patients' bedsides in their home."

In the home is primarily where the bulk of patient care takes place. Last year, out of 60,000 total days of care, only 2,700 were in the hospital, Schueth said. The interdisciplinary team of clinical professionals - physicians, registered nurses, social workers and faith leaders - ensure a shared dedication to the patient.

"Most people want to die at home surrounded by the things and people they love - where they're calling the shots," Schueth said. "We help them come to a natural end rather than making death a medical event."

Hospice care is covered by insurance, primarily by Medicare. Unlike other health-care entities, hospice programs are responsible for paying for everything related to the terminal illness - equipment, medication and professional visits - without any out-of-pocket charge to the patient.

And no patient is turned away for lack of insurance, Schueth said.

"We provide the same level of care to everyone. The philanthropic support we get from this very generous community helps us cover the gap between what insurance pays and what it costs us to provide the service and for anybody who doesn't have insurance."

Schueth said out of the organization's annual \$13 million budget, \$1 million comes from philanthropic support. It has offices in Boulder, Longmont, Lafayette and Louisville.

Last January, a few members of the team joined Schueth on a trip to Tanzania to visit Bumbuli Lutheran Hospital Hospice and Palliative Care Program. Partnered with the program since 2006, HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties shares friendship, affirmation and best practices with the small African hospice organization.

"While they don't have the same standard of living that we do, there's a lot to be said about community spirit," she said. "I was just amazed at how supportive they are with so few resources."

Schueth said there's so much that can be done for people at the end of life to help people celebrate and complete their lives in a meaningful way. "When you think about it, we only get one chance at dying well."