



SolAmor Hospice by Nancy Cohen

"The benefit of living in a world that is comfortable discussing death is that it becomes a world capable of embracing life."

Anne Brener, L.C.S.W

Death. It is a word that, whether read, spoken or heard, can immediately evoke a sense of discomfort. Rather than plainly stating "he (or she) died," we often speak of death with words like "passed away," "expired," "deceased," or "no longer with us," thinking they may soften the impact. Death alters our perspectives and can instantly clarify what we most value...think about what you would do or say if you knew you were to die today/tomorrow/in a year. Hospice care aspires to help simplify and ease some of the fear and intensity surrounding the process of dying.

Sometimes referred to as "comfort care," hospice is dedicated to supporting patients with terminal illnesses, their families and caregivers. Milford's SolAmor Hospice, one of several agencies offering this care in

Connecticut (the state which lays claim to the first American hospice, located in Branford), maintains "Hospice isn't a place, but a philosophy, and at SolAmor, we believe no one should die alone." Their mission is "to preserve each patient's dignity while removing the fear associated with dying through pain management, emotional, and spiritual support."

Essentially, hospice is available for any patient facing a life-limiting illness where their physician/medical director gives a prognosis of approximately six months or less, assuming the illness will follow its normal course. Staff offers an assessment to help determine if timing is right for hospice...and desired. If a condition improves and the disease goes into remission, patients can be discharged.

Hospice philosophy holds that

end-of-life care should emphasize quality of life and treat the whole person, not just the disease. It focuses on patient and family centered care that addresses physical, spiritual, emotional, and practical needs. An interdisciplinary team of professionals works with patients and families to design and implement a personalized care plan. Teams may include physicians, nurses, home healthcare aides, social workers, spiritual leaders, bereavement support coordinators, and volunteers.

SolAmor staff travels where needed, whether to hospitals, nursing or assisted living centers, in-patient hospice facilities, or private homes. Routine visits are made during normal business hours, with nursing and support services also available after hours. Physicians and medical staff are "on-call 24/7." Volunteers assist with such activities as visiting patients, administrative tasks, and craft or music sessions.

Medications, services and equipment related to the terminal illness are provided. Although aggressive curative treatment is discontinued, staff is trained in comprehensive pain management and palliative measures to help ensure patients are comfortable and pain-free. SolAmor Hospice is also increasing its complementary care options, including reiki, massage, creative or pet therapies, meditation, and aromatherapy.

Hospice neither hastens nor postpones dying. Like doctors or midwives who lend support and expertise during childbirth, hospice provides presence and specialized knowledge during the dying process. After the patient's death, hospice care continues with up to 13 months of bereavement counseling for loved ones.

SolAmor Hospice (parent company: Sunbridge) has locations in over 10 states. It is a Medicare certified program and the local office is reviewed by both Medicare and the State of Connecticut. An agency aiming to respect and accommodate patient's beliefs and preferences, religious and cultural, it has been in Milford for two years and provides services in New Haven and Fairfield counties.

SolAmor offers the following suggestions for dying patients and their caregivers:

- ♥ **Meaning of life/spirituality:** The dying person may want to discuss/explore feelings about issues concerning the meaning of life, what's beyond death, faith or absence thereof. For caregivers, encourage (do not force) your loved one to open up about their feelings, share their experiences and beliefs. Share your feelings openly and honestly with them.
- ♥ **Final wishes:** For the dying person, what are your final wishes? What legacy would you like to leave? Perhaps write/dictate letters to those whom you wish to communicate thoughts/feelings, or a narrative of your life story and what you have learned. Caregivers, help your loved one explore and share feelings with you or someone else they trust.
- ♥ **Goals:** If possible, help the dying person accomplish a lifelong desire/goal. Examples: hot air balloon ride, trip to Yankee Stadium, ocean sunrise/sunset, concert of a favorite artist.
- ♥ **Unfinished business:** Caregivers, as much as possible help your loved one finalize things they feel compelled to complete before they die, such as making peace with self, fellows, or a higher power, as appropriate.
- ♥ **Final goodbyes:** Invite family and friends to visit/talk with the dying person, hold their hand, let them know they are cared about and not alone. Most importantly, listen and be present.
- ♥ **Keeping Vigil:** If possible, arrange for a group to take turns staying with the dying person at their bedside. This supports the dying person and enables caregivers time for their own respite and care (sleep, shower, go for a bike ride/walk/massage, see a movie, meditate, talk with someone to unburden overwhelming worries, fears, anxiety).
- ♥ **When death is near:** The dying person may say they know death is near and even talk about seeing or feeling presence of loved ones who have died. Acknowledge these moments as valid and sacred...the space between life and death is being crossed. Simply be with them during this most mysterious and intimate time as they walk the steps in their final journey. Don't invalidate experiences of dying (or grieving) simply because they go beyond our current understanding.

SolAmor Hospice is located at 4 Oxford Road, Suite E4 in Milford, CT, 203.301.0489, www.solamorphospice.com.