



GRAND ROUNDS

Have you ever thought about what you would do if faced with a terminal illness? What are your wishes for care? What kind of medical treatment do you want, or not want? What do you want your loved ones to know?

These tough questions are the hard conversations that families need to have to provide the best end-of-life care, says RVH Palliative Care Coordinator, Ann Marie Urbaitis.

Especially so after taking part in a special screening and workshop given by Stephen Jenkinson, MTS, MSW, RSW, who presented his film *Griefwalker* in early November. *Griefwalker* is a National Film Board production about Jenkinson and his work with dying people.

“It was very thought-provoking,” reflects Urbaitis.

Jenkinson is a Golden Lake area resident and former program director for children’s grief and palliative care in a Toronto hospital. He was an outpatient at RVH when nurses Margaret Demuth and Erin Prentice got to know him.

“He’s a pretty cool guy,” Demuth recalls of her initial conversations with the remarkable man.

“He told Erin about the workshops he gives around the country,” says Demuth, adding how important it was for her and her co-workers to hear his message because they face terminally ill patients and their families on a daily basis.

With Urbaitis’s help, the ladies went about setting up a Palliative Care Education Day with Jenkinson as their keynote speaker. It was attended by approximately 70 fellow nurses, health care providers in palliative care and oncology units, a local funeral director, hospital volunteers and community caregivers.

The response to both the film and his workshop was mixed. “Some don’t get it, while others say it was awesome,” says Demuth.

Either way, his honest discussion has many of the palliative care team talking long after the event, and that’s a good thing.

“It certainly opened everyone’s eyes about how we’re neglecting to converse about it,” says Prentice.

“Right now it seems the attitude from a medical standpoint is to keep people alive at all costs,” says Urbaitis. Jenkinson presented a different perspective in celebrating the life lived and allowing nature to take its course.

“There are challenges in accepting this,” admits Urbaitis, “We are a death-denying society.” But one thing is for certain, keeping the patient comfortable and supporting the family through the process remains a priority at RVH.

It’s really about being honest with patients and respecting their wishes before it’s too late.

Even that part takes a collaborative effort, says Urbaitis. “It’s not just one person who can deliver palliative care.” RVH’s multidisci-

plinary palliative care team—from the physician to the pharmacist, the nurses, dietitian, physiotherapists, social worker and all of the support staff in between—provides extra support through to the grieving process.

People are afraid of the word palliative, Urbaitis realizes. “A lot of times in the medical community death is perceived as a failure.” But after the *Griefwalker* experience she believes that many of the palliative care providers are seeing things a little differently.

“We know at RVH we treat our patients medically very well, and we provide outstanding palliative care. Jenkinson provided a lot of insight on the transition phase and how we can improve our role in this sensitive time of care,” says Urbaitis.



***Griefwalker* film and palliative care presenter Stephen Jenkinson.**

Photo courtesy Steve Newman, Renfrew Mercury