



Grateful for those caring angels

Phil Gravelle, Guest Column

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Sitting here in the sunroom at Lisaard House, the Cambridge cancer hospice, I've had a chance to reflect on my mom Gerry's long journey through our healthcare system.

Through multiple surgeries, radiation and drug therapies, she has kept a positive outlook. It is her third round with cancer and now, for her body, time is very short.

The hospice is a calm oasis where time seems to slow down and death is treated as a natural process. It is opposite of the hospital, where the battle rages on. Mom's hospital stay last fall was a difficult ordeal, because of her frailty and the risks inherent in a huge system trying to serve so many people.

Mom broke her collarbone just reaching across the bed. She got an infection that required a quarantine. She developed a pressure sore. A round trip to Kitchener for radiation took eight hours. Often in serious pain, she was distressed by noise from roommates and the busy ward.

The nurses, doctors and other staff at Cambridge Memorial continued to provide good care, even when they were clearly not having a good day, and for that I am grateful.

The long illness has given us opportunities to express our appreciation, say our goodbyes and build up bonds of family support. It has revealed a broader network, with many cards, emails and visits, especially from their extended family at St. Gregory's. My father Earl has been a source of inspiration, accepting the challenges of each day. My parents continue to teach by example and for that I am grateful.

When Mom returned home, another division of the health care army jumped into action. It was encouraging to see how far we've come in developing a system to help people grow old at home.

The palliative team co-ordinated by Community Care included nurses, a nurse practitioner and an occupational therapist. Thanks go out to Jennifer, Abby, Laura, Maureen and Susan, and to the staff at Lisaard and Meals on Wheels.

There is one group of health care professionals that deserve special thanks. The team of Personal Support Workers (PSWs) from Bayshore Home Health – Jackie, Jamie, Robin, Lisa and Angela – provided outstanding service.

"It was their remarkable gentleness, true kindness and genuine caring for perfect strangers which impressed me most," said my sister.

PSWs don't use high-tech equipment or fancy drugs, and don't make a lot of money. They have the confidence to walk into a home, provide intimate personal care and feeding, then switch to sweeping, cooking or laundry. One day, an unexpected pot of soup arrived.

They taught us what she needed, told jokes to make her smile, whispered little bits of conversation and became her friend and advocate, knowing she might not be there the next day. Mom was surrounded by angels before her death and for that I am very grateful.

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