

Support center expands program; families of dying to get advice

By Alicia Gano
Of the Emerald

Bright Wings has done it again — brought together a room full of strangers and unified them with an understanding of their common fears and frustrations about death.

A Eugene-based cancer support center since 1982, Bright Wings recently expanded to include assistance to families and sufferers of other terminal or severe chronic illnesses.

Bright Wings counselors hold periodic workshops to provide the community with education opportunities. The workshops are designed to provide information and methods to help people identify and change their feelings of fear about cancer or other terminal illnesses.

Most participants have a terminally ill friend or relative and express frustration and confusion about how to help during the dying process or how to give encouragement if recovery is a possibility.

Bright Wings counselors expressed the need for friends and family to come to understand the "agenda" of the alive (but dying) person instead of hanging on relentlessly to their own need to "help."

For instance, family members may insist a dying person accept the inevitability of death before they are ready to, thinking it will be better for them in the end, according to Donna Howell, a home health nurse for Hospice, an international program for terminally ill patients who wish to die at home. Howell works for the Hospice program at Sacred Heart General Hospital.

Often, family and friends try to comfort the dying in their own way, rather than a way the dying person can handle at the time, Howell said.

Sometimes learning to cope with the impending death of a friend or loved one means first accepting your own powerlessness and mortality before you can offer comfort or kind words, said Barbara Thurmond, who also works with Hospice services at Sacred Heart.

"Maybe the lesson to be learned at the time of dying is, 'How do I live a life that brings with it painful experiences over which I have no control?'" Thurmond said. "Your job is not to know

what to say or do. The most important thing is to just be there as a supporter."

Speaking to the pain and dread of cancer itself, Howell said, in reality there are many diseases to fear besides the most commonly feared: cancer. She listed AIDS, Lou Gehrig's disease and emphysema as debilitating and largely untreatable.

"The difference between cancer and these other diseases is we can do something about cancer," Howell said. Most people associate pain with cancer, but in fact only 50 percent of cancers are painful, she added.

Treatment of a cancer patient's pain has become more liberalized, Howell said. Until recently, she said, physicians and nurses were "clock watchers" about giving pain medications. This practice often created unnecessary pain in terminal patients, she said.

"It doesn't have to make you sick," she said.

Now physicians commonly use long-acting morphine and other strong pain relievers to make a terminal patient comfortable and maintain quality in their remaining life, Howell said.

Chemotherapy and the resulting sickness is another concern raised by workshop participants.

Citing work done throughout the country with cancer patients in pain, she said there has been great progress made in alleviating their discomfort.

"It is becoming more accepted that patients have a right to decide what they want," Howell said. However, she warned many patients have trouble expressing their discomfort and reminded that friends and relatives should be sensitive to their needs.

"Pain can kill you. You want to die after awhile," she said.

Bright Wings counselors Michelle Hawkins and Diane Rivo stressed the need of supporters to take care of themselves as well as the dying person. Many supporters feel guilty because they need sleep or just want to get away for a time; it is critical to take care of your own emotional needs while caring for someone else, Hawkins said.

Legislative update

Senate may stop speed limit bill

By B.J. Thomsen
Of the Emerald

Oregonians may soon be sailing down the state's rural interstate highways at 65 mph if HB 3147 gains as strong a nod of approval in the Senate as it did in the House last Tuesday.

The bill passed 46-13 in the House and now moves to the Senate where some have predicted it will be in for a rough time.

Sen. Jane Cease, D-Portland, chairwoman of the Senate Transportation Committee, has expressed reservations about raising the speed limit and said she would certainly oppose the bill if SB 87, the mandatory seat belt law, does not gain House approval.

The bill also would stiffen the penalty for speeding in an effort to prevent drivers from going faster than 65. Statistics show that under the current speed limit, Oregonians regularly

travel in excess of 60 mph.

In other legislative action, the House Labor Committee last Monday passed a bill, HB 2479, that would restrict smoking in the workplace.

Rep. Rick Kotulski, D-Corbett, predicted a lingering death for the bill in the Joint Ways and Means Committee. Kotulski failed in an attempt to have the bill sent directly to the House for consideration.

The bill was sent to the budgeting committee because it would cost the Oregon Health Division \$143,000. That agency has been selected to oversee enforcement of the law.

The bill would require employers to implement smoking policies approved by their non-smoking employees.

People who enjoy making crank phone calls may be in for a rude surprise if the Senate approves a bill sent from the

House last week.

The bill, HB 2903, would make it a crime to make repeated calls to a person who has asked the caller not to call again. If convicted, a crank caller could be fined as much as \$1,000 and be imprisoned for up to six months.

A bill that would prohibit random drug testing of employees by their employers passed out of the Senate Labor Committee on a vote of 4-2 Thursday and now goes before the Senate for consideration.

A provision permitting random urinalysis of public safety employees such as police and fire fighters was removed from the bill before passage.

The bill now would allow employers to require drug testing of employees only if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that an employee is abusing drugs.

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