



Palliative care volunteers Dorothy Patterson and Dora Prudi with some of the fresh bread baked for patients and their families on the An Cala palliative care unit at Cape Breton Regional Hospital. (April 2021)

We are so fortunate here in Cape Breton to have one of the most advanced palliative care models in the country. The Hospice Palliative Care Society of Cape Breton County and Nova Scotia Health's Palliative Care Service work in partnership to provide professional, comfortable, and holistic palliative and end-of-life care. Our shared goal is to enable the best quality of life, until the very last moments. As we mark National Hospice Palliative Care Week, we reflect on our partnership and introduce you to some of the people who have been integral to both organizations.

"The level of end-of-life care available to patients and families across our community isn't just standard, it's exceptional. Much of that can be attributed to the partnership between the Society and Nova Scotia Health's Palliative Care Service. While it sounds cliché, it's completely true that together, we are better." **Jana Lewis, Chair, Hospice Palliative Care Society**

The Hospice Society is a non-profit organization that offers additional comforts that help to ease what patients and families face at the end-of-life. For over 30 years, the Society has been working tirelessly to provide support for patients and families in palliative care, whether at home, in hospital and now in Hospice. The Society is there when it is most needed. It provides funds to ensure the unique needs of patients and families are met, contributes to the bereavement program, provides funds for staff education, music therapy, and offers training and support for the volunteers who provide special touches like baked goods, flower arrangements and an understanding smile. Donations to the Society, now and always, will be directed to these and new programs that make a difference for families when it is most needed.

Nova Scotia Health's Palliative Care Service is a multi-disciplinary team that provides specialized and compassionate care in hospital, at home and in Hospice. The Service provides care tailored to meet the patients' needs and enhances the overall quality of life. It also coordinates the many facets of the volunteer and bereavement programs.

Understanding the Circle of Care

There is a phrase often used in Palliative Care that is known as "The Circle of Care". It speaks to the important philosophy of providing personalized support and care necessary to meet the physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs of patients and their families at every stage of a life-limiting illness from diagnosis onward. Support and care that focuses on maintaining the best quality of life and delivered in a setting of the patient's choice - be it at home, in long term care, in hospital, or in Hospice. Cape Breton patients and families in the Palliative Care Service now have access to all four settings which many, if not most communities lack. It means that the patient and



Registered nurses Deanna Harvey and Katharine Smith prepare a patient bed at Hospice Cape Breton.

family will experience the appropriate care in the appropriate setting at the appropriate time.

At the heart of hospice palliative care lies the belief that every person deserves a vibrant and beautiful life, from beginning to end. For those facing a life-limiting illness, it can feel like their world has faded to shades of grey - hospice palliative care brings colour, peace and joy back in the ways that matter most to patients and families.

Completing the Circle of Care

Thanks to the outstanding generosity of a good number, both near and far, the Society was able to raise the funds needed to build Hospice Cape Breton. Now, this 13-bed Hospice is a space where the Palliative Care Service, and the Society can work together to provide end-of-life care to patients and families in an environment built with their every need in mind—reflecting a true and caring partnership with the community at the forefront. The arrival of the first patients has brought the Hospice to life. It is home. Now patients and families have another choice and a new setting in which to receive palliative care. It truly reflects excellence in end-of-life care.



The dreamcatcher created by Membertou Cultural Ambassador David Meuse in the Sunqwan Room at Hospice Cape Breton.

A Circle of Love

When Hospice Cape Breton officially opened its doors, it was a proud moment for Chief Terry Paul, CEO of Membertou. "Our community and team in Membertou proudly donated land and then watched this space build up, to the home-like facility that we see here today," said Chief Paul. "Our motto in Membertou is 'Welcoming the World' and today it gives me great pleasure to welcome the Hospice to our community. The hard work and tireless dedication of the Hospice Society and the Nova Scotia Health Palliative Care Service has made this a reality. You started the circle of care and now it's wrapped a circle of love around our communities."

Building genuine and open relationships with those in First Nations communities is one of the joint priorities of the Society and Nova Scotia Health. It is essential to respect all cultures. That is one of the reasons why Hospice Cape Breton offers space for smudging ceremonies and each room honours both our Indigenous and Cape Breton roots. A lovely dreamcatcher created by Membertou Cultural Ambassador David Meuse is proudly displayed in the Sunqwan (Water) Room.

"Each one of us hopes to leave a legacy, no matter how big or small, and Hospice Cape Breton honours everyone who enters its doors—fulfilling their needs in a respectful and dignified manner, notes Chief Paul. "The staff, volunteers and families make this facility a home. Our hope is that patients and families enjoy the tranquil, familiar, and serene setting it provides."

Both the Society and Nova Scotia Health are grateful for the support and mutual understanding of our Indigenous communities, helping to make Hospice a home for everyone.



Nancy Dwyer and Patricia Jackson interviewed by CBC's Wendy Knight during the 2019 Society's Sufferer Treasures Pop-Up Shop - one of several community fundraisers that contribute to patient and family program support.

A Journey Made Easier

Registered nurse. Consult nurse. Community nurse. An Cala Palliative Care Unit nurse. Clinical nurse lead. When it comes to palliative care nursing, Laurie Mortimer has done it all.

Her vast nursing and palliative care experience led to her current role as clinical nurse educator for palliative care within Nova Scotia Health's Eastern Zone. In this role, Mortimer looks after the educational needs of all palliative care nurses within the zone, which includes Cape Breton Island, Antigonish and Guysborough counties. The role is a first for the Palliative Care Service.

As an educator, one of the key things Mortimer imparts on her students is the importance of meeting people where they are in their palliative journey. "It's important to sit with patients to listen and learn, and go from there," says Mortimer. "During the trajectory of their illness, what people need changes. Sometimes that means helping alleviate stress and anxiety, providing advice or assistance, supporting them in decision making or helping to facilitate courageous conversations."

Being part of a multi-disciplinary team is key to the education Mortimer provides. She says everyone on the team has a role to play and is united by one vision. "Palliative care is about quality of life, about making days count," says Mortimer. "People need to know they are important to the world, and they matter."

Giving Gestures

It's the little things that have the biggest impact. A kind word. A cup of tea. An understanding smile. Lisa McNeil-Campbell is the palliative care volunteer program lead with Nova Scotia's Health's Eastern Zone and she sees the impact those giving gestures can have every day.

"Our volunteers do so many little things for patients and families," says McNeil-Campbell. "From baking to being at the bedside, however they can help, they are there."

The program is funded by the Hospice Society, and enables volunteers to provide programs in hospital, at home and in Hospice. Most programs require a weekly time commitment of three to four hours, while others are on an as-needed basis. Comprehensive training is provided for everyone who volunteers.

One of the newest programs is the reception role at the new Hospice. "They are the first point of contact for anyone coming to the facility," says McNeil-Campbell. "They help put patients and families at ease during what can be a very emotional time. This role also offers an opportunity for volunteers to work with another, giving friends or couples a chance to volunteer together."

New volunteers are always welcome. A full list of programs can be found on the Hospice Society's website www.hospicecapebreton.org. For more information or to apply to be a volunteer, visit <https://hospicecapebreton.org/ways-to-give/volunteer-information/> or contact Lisa McNeil-Campbell at 902-539-1742 or lmcc-neil-campbell@nshealth.ca.

Making the Days Count

Dr. Anne Frances D'Intino's involvement with Hospice Palliative Care Society goes back almost 30 years, however her interest in palliative care began when she was a family physician. "I realized that not everyone had a smooth time at the end-of-life in terms of symptom control, comfort and stress," says Dr. D'Intino.

As a palliative care physician, Dr. D'Intino's patients require pain and



Society members celebrate opening of Hospice Cape Breton in September 2021

symptom management

for life-limiting illnesses and care. She asks her patients to "tell me everything about you that will help me to give you the best care I can," says Dr. D'Intino. "I need to know what matters most to you so that I can see what I can do to make the days look like you want them to be. These are precious days, and we want to make the most of them for the patient, and the people they love."

Ensuring that patients have a good quality of life is the top priority for Dr. D'Intino and the entire palliative care team. "We often say it's not about counting the days. It's about making the days count," she says.

Bears that Bind

It's never easy to lose someone. Nor is it easy to prepare for that loss. When you look at the world through different lenses, like a special needs child does, it becomes even more challenging. That's the case for Callum Baldwin, a 17-year-old with autism. Callum is non-verbal and was very close to his grandmother, Rhonda McCullum.

Their connection was a strong one. That's why preparing him for the loss of his grandmother was so important, to help him adjust to his new reality.

Rhonda worked with palliative care music therapist Jill Murphy to record special messages for her grandchildren as part of the memory bear program. The program began several years ago when a father wanted to leave a special reminder of his love for his daughters. A message is recorded, placed in the paw of the teddy bear, and the recipient has the voice of their loved one at their fingertips.

Initially, the family was concerned that recording separate messages would be too trying for Rhonda, however, she persevered and was able to remind each of her grandchildren of their special bond. Memory bears were provided for Rhonda's grandchildren - Grace Baldwin, Jackson and Tyson Demone as well as Callum and Carley - with a message specially tailored for each of them.

Callum loves stuffed to begin with, and his bear is now a favourite. When he first received it, his mother Tracy said she could hear him pushing the paw over and over again to hear his grandmother say "Hi buddy, it's grandma. I love you." He tracks the bear under the blankets for safe keeping and it now has a cherished place among his other stuffed animals on his bed. Tracy says her mom Rhonda was both sad and happy to see the reaction the bears evoked.

The bonds we nurture with family and with friends are the ties that can keep our hearts whole as we prepare for loss or remember those who are gone. For Callum, that bond gets stronger with just a push of a button.



Palliative care patient with Rhonda McCullum with her grandson Callum and his special memory bear.



Dr. Anne Frances D'Intino, palliative care physician