

What's Hospice? What's Palliative Care?

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Hospice and palliative care share similar values. Both are multidisciplinary, patient-centered disciplines that address the whole person, including her psychosocial and spiritual needs. Both focus on keeping patients free from pain and providing the best quality of life possible, not only for patients but for their families. Both types of care can be provided in the patient's home, a hospital or in other facilities. Hospice services are typically delivered in the home.

The goal of hospice is to ensure a patient's comfort at the end of life. Medicare and most insurance plans include a hospice benefit. To qualify, patients must have a terminal diagnosis and be expected to live six months or less, and they must agree to forego further curative treatment. Medicare places no age limit on hospice eligibility – young people who are diagnosed with a terminal disease and have a life expectancy of six months or less can receive hospice services.

In a recent article in the “New England Journal of Medicine” cited on the Vermont Ethics Network's website, Drs. Amy S. Kelley and Diane E. Meier distinguish between nonhospice palliative care and hospice palliative care. They explain

nonhospice palliative care is offered simultaneously with life-prolonging and curative therapies for persons living with serious, complex, and life-threatening illness. Hospice palliative care becomes appropriate when curative treatments are no longer beneficial, when the burdens of these treatments exceed their benefits, or when patients are entering the last weeks to months of life.¹

¹ Kelley, Dr. Amy S. and Dr. Diane E. Meier, N ENGL J MED 363;8. August 19, 2010, accessed at http://www.vtethicsnetwork.org/difference_hospice_palliative.html on March 31, 2011.