

## PEGGIE SANBORN

December, 1995

Some years after Howie and I retired to Cape Cod, a setting so pleasing as to be too-good-to-be-true still, I felt the need to "give back." I looked for volunteer work which would be very productive and which would involve a minimum of tedious meetings and arguments about the by-laws. At the same time I found two friends who were dying in a lonely way: some of our other friends were writing them off as too sick for visitors or too disturbing to see. Hospice of Cape Cod was waiting for me. I took a 27-hour course and was launched as a volunteer assigned to six patients in a good nursing home and six others in our residence facility Hospice House.

Hospice care is ordered up by a physician in consultation with the patient and family when that patient is deemed terminal and for whom our services may be therapeutic. The philosophy is that when medicine can no longer add days to one's life our goal is to add some life to one's days. Each hospice patient is assigned an R.N., nurse aide, social worker, volunteer and chaplain. Paid services are supported by private insurers and Medicare and Medicaid systems. Our patients are at home, in seven nursing homes, or Hospice House, our seven-bed residence in Barnstable. The role of volunteer is to provide comfort and companionship, understanding and help for the family, bereavement support, errands and transportation; anything helpful nor requiring the professional.

My two certified therapy dogs accompany me most visits. Where they are welcome they provide a high degree of fuzzy warm comfort. When not needed they lie on the floor, sit in the laps of other patients, or whine in the car.

In two years I have made friends with over three dozen patients. Some have fooled everyone and lived on and on. At this writing my people include women ages 99, 100 and 102, all lucid and interesting. One patient with wonderful stories for me was a World War I German army nurse!

Although many of our patients are too young and are suffering cruel illnesses, there are countless heartwarming or humorous incidents. "I have to go," whispered Jim, a skeletal patient surrounded by family and hospice workers. "Jim! You can go! You can!" they told him animatedly, giving him permission to die. "Yes but..." Jim pleaded. "It's O.K., Jim, you can go!" they repeated. Poor Jim only needed to go to the bathroom.

Whatever the direction of healthcare in the future, my hope is that the role of hospice care will never be diminished.

