

Hospice and a healthy view of dying

Pradhan E¹

¹Lecturer, Dept. of Ophthalmology, KMCTH

Recently, there was an article by Julie Neuberger on the need for a healthy view of dying, in the pages of the British Medical Journal which is also relevant to our own society in this day and age. It brings to mind the question whether the “hospice” which is so much talked about in the western world has become a necessity in our part of the world too.

The term “hospice” may be new to us, but the concept of it is certainly not. A hospice basically means an establishment or programme caring for the emotional and physical needs of the terminally ill. Establishments of a similar nature have been around in our part of the world for centuries now in the form of *Vridhashrams, patis*, etc. In more recent times, the concept of hospices attracted much attention in the West when it was felt that despite the excellent quality of health care provided for the physical illness, the mind and spirit of the patients was not being adequately cared for. With rapid advancements in the treatment of many illnesses like cancers, AIDS etc, medical science has been able to prolong the lives of many people. It was realized that it is important for health care providers to also remain equally concerned about the need to provide a good quality of life to these older and terminally ill individuals whom they had helped save. The need for a more holistic approach to health care was felt and hospices were seen to be the answer, at least in part, to this need.

In his president’s lecture for the King’s Fund in June this year, the Bishop of London, the Reverend Richard Chartes expressed concern about the inability of society to view life and health holistically. He recounted how in the ruins of the ancient Pergamon and its Temple of the Divine Healer, Aesculapius, he could remember contemplating the theme of healthy living and healthy dying. “The temple,” he felt, “must have been a tranquil and beautiful environment in which to

recover, in an atmosphere that was a cross between Champneys and Oxbridge College.” This is exactly how a hospice is envisioned to be- a tranquil place where the sick and dying are cared for and allowed to live and die with peace and dignity.

We take pride in our culture that respects the elderly, however frail or ill they may be. We also take pride in our social system of strong family support. However, even in our society, there are many individuals who are not so fortunate as to have their family take care of them in their last days. With more and more younger people migrating to foreign shores for better employment and career opportunities, more and more older people are having to spend their last days without their families taking care of them. Even the fortunate ones who are taken care of may still feel their emotional and spiritual needs unfulfilled. The hospice in the general sense of the word may not be an appropriate solution to all such situations, but the use of the concept to provide care in a peaceful environment to the sick and the dying can be universally applied.

Death is the one certainty in life, yet, Ms Neuberger in her article opines, western society and western medicines in particular seem unable to come to terms with it. To quote the Reverend Richard Chartes again, “our failure to face our own fear of death is an important reason why we find it so difficult to help the dying and the bereaved.”

As Ilora Finlay argues, “just as perinatal mortality is a marker of nutrition and public health as well as perinatal services, the care of the dying is an indicator that reflects the overall quality of our care and compassion.” Human life is the most precious divine gift. Let us cherish it even in the face of death. Let us learn to respect the dying and give them the care and dignity they deserve.