

IHMs in action



Kathleen (Kathleen Mary) O'Brien, IHM, spiritual care coordinator for Mercy Memorial Hospice, knows there's something profound in working with the dying.

"The most important thing we can do for hospice patients is to listen," Sister Kate explains. "If the patient is unable to communicate, we talk to the family to determine what the person's spiritual life had been. Did Mom love to pray the Rosary? Did Dad like certain prayers or Bible passages? From that point, we try to provide what is needed for that person and that family."

She remembers being called to the hospital to sit with an unconscious hospice patient. The man's daughter was on her way to be with him but was not expected to arrive before he died.

"He was Jewish," notes Sister Kate, "so I read to him from the Old Testament, including Psalm 23. One of his nurses told me later that he opened his eyes as I read and seemed to take comfort from the passages. When his daughter got there, she appreciated that someone had been with her dad and also that his faith traditions had been respected."

All hospice patients are offered spiritual care. Two weeks after admission to the hospice program, Sister Kate telephones those who had declined it to make sure their needs are being met.

"There have been times when people who had originally decided against spiritual care rethink it," she says. "They may find their support system is lacking something or they want spiritual reinforcement. Whatever their reasons, and whatever their faith, we are there for them whenever they want us."

"Emotionally and spiritually, being 'there' for someone is different for each person," comments Sister Kate.

Sister Kate has also worked with families to plan funeral liturgies that are meaningful and comforting. She views her hospice ministry as a time to truly be with people and their feelings.

"It's about helping people see their chance to extend forgiveness and to ask it of those they care about, to express appreciation and love in order to achieve a sense of peace about death," she says.

Sister Kate has been with Mercy Memorial Hospice since November 2004. She had been a pastoral minister in a variety of settings, including college campuses and prisons.