

MAZE OF HOSPICE CARE MADE EASY

By Polly Brown

Hospice of Martha's Vineyard has formed an alliance with Hospice and Palliative Care of Cape Cod to form Island Hospice, and VNA has joined as a member of the team. That's not news, I know, but it has raised lots of questions, particularly the question of whom to call. The short answer is to call either hospice, and we'll work together to get the help you need. Here's how the two hospices differ.

Hospice of Martha's Vineyard is licensed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to deliver hospice care, but it is not constrained by Medicare and other insurance regulations. That means that we can take care of patients from the moment of diagnosis of a serious, potentially life-limiting illness. Our nurses can accompany the patient and family to doctor's visits and help them understand the disease and its usual course. They can support the patient's choice of whether to pursue chemotherapy, surgery, radiation or palliative care. Our chaplain and social worker can help them with anticipatory grief, dealing with the possibility of a premature loss of vigorous health and death and can help find other social services the patient might need. Our volunteers can bring laughter and comfort to them all.

What Hospice of Martha's Vineyard cannot do is to buy the medicines, and provide home health aides and occupational and physical therapists and the medical equipment needed, such as a hospital bed. Those are things that insurance does provide. In order to bring those benefits to the Island, we have allied ourselves with a licensed and Medicare certified hospice, so that Vineyard patients can access this financial help without losing the "open door" to help at any time.

In order to be eligible for Island Hospice (the Medicare certified hospice), the patient must choose that benefit and must have been certified by two physicians that, in the normal course of the illness, this patient would be unlikely to live beyond 6 months. That doesn't mean that the benefit lasts only for 6 months. If the patient continues to live, then he or she can either be discharged as stable or re-certified, if the normal course of the illness would likely lead to death within 6 months. Some patients under the insurance benefit have lived for years. There is no cap or limit on an individual's Medicare coverage.

So, the difference between Hospice of Martha's Vineyard and Island Hospice is that Hospice of Martha's Vineyard does not require a prognosis of 6 months to live and does not pay for medicines, home health aides, therapy, medical equipment or any of the expenses incurred by the patient. Both hospices do provide the nursing, social, spiritual and volunteer support that is the hallmark of hospice.

Last year, VNA stated that it was planning to become a Medicare certified Hospice. When Hospice of Martha's Vineyard and Hospice and Palliative Care of Cape Cod allied to form Island Hospice, VNA decided to join us. VNA is a certified home health agency. Some of their patients are eligible for the Hospice insurance benefit. Some of their nurses have become certified Hospice nurses, as are those at both Island Hospice and Hospice of Martha's Vineyard. Now, with this alliance, both VNA patients and Hospice of Martha's Vineyard patients can have the financial benefits of Medicare and other insurance,

and have the same care team that they had before becoming Island Hospice patients, together with expanded support services.

The three organizations work in concert to bring the best care and the financial benefits of insurance to Island patients and their families. Anyone can refer someone with potentially life-limiting illness to Hospice. If the referral comes to Hospice of Martha's Vineyard, and the patient qualifies for the insurance benefit, then the patient will be given the option of working with Island Hospice. It doesn't matter which organization gets the initial call – the patient is the focus.

Any questions about hospice care and our three-way alliance can be answered by calling either Kate at Island Hospice , at 508-696-7788 or Terre at Hospice of Martha's Vineyard, at 508-693-0189. Call before you think you're ready for hospice care – you'll be surprised how much we can help.

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