



New Kitchener hospice meets a great need

Waterloo Region Record

Innisfree is an island off the west coast of Ireland. It is a place of peace and tranquility that was immortalized in a poem by W.B. Yeats. Innisfree is also the name of the new hospice being built in south Kitchener; it is a place where people go to die.

For me, the construction of this building brings both joy and sadness: joy, because we are getting something this community needs; sadness, because it is the type of place my dad did not have access to when he died a year ago.

My father had been sick for years, and when he received his final diagnosis — liver cancer — my parents decided that he would die at their home in Toronto. It was what they wanted.

They were put in touch with the local palliative care doctors and nurses to arrange for home care, which only amounted to an hour here and there. For the most part, family members were expected to provide the bulk of the nursing care.

Eventually, although they had wanted dad to die at home, the nurse convinced them that a palliative care bed in one of the local hospitals would be a better choice.

Dad would have the high level nursing care and pain control that he needed, and mom could focus on just being with him.

There were promises of privacy and dignity, with support and comfort for both the patient and the family. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Dad was moved to a palliative care unit in a Toronto hospital on a Friday evening and placed in a small room that was once a meeting room. Overnight, another patient was brought into the same room. Now, there were two beds holding two dying men squeezed into a former meeting room, leaving precious little space for their families.

When my 83-year-old mother arrived at the hospital the next day, there wasn't even a chair for her to sit on. Luckily, a kind orderly borrowed a chair from the nurse's station so mom could at least sit down.

On Sunday afternoon, my cousin and I went to see dad. Several people were visiting the other man. A few minutes into our visit, the room went eerily quiet. Then there was a flurry of nurses through the door; curtains were pulled, and someone was crying softly. The other man had passed away. We tried to continue our conversation with dad but even he knew what was going on, and in his fading voice, he suggested we go get a cup of coffee for a few minutes to give the other family some privacy. Dad couldn't come with us, so he pretended to sleep.

Our hearts went out to the other family. They were grieving, and we were intruders.

This was not private or dignified. To describe the situation as awkward or uncomfortable does not do it justice: It was awful. This discomfort carried on for several hours until the grieving family left.

The next morning dad was quickly moved into the first available private room. There were enough chairs and a cot so at least my mom could stay overnight. Dad died the following day.

We do not ask people to give birth in shared rooms, so why is it OK when people are dying?

What do privacy and dignity mean, if not a chair for comfort, or some private space to grieve? If hospice care had been available to dad, we would have taken it in a second.

So that's why I greet the construction of Innisfree hospice with a sense of joy. It tells me that more people will have the opportunity to have comfort, dignity, and peace when they need it most.

Since hospices rely on donations, please remember Innisfree if you want to offer a bit of comfort to someone who needs end-of-life care.

Paula Crooks lives in Kitchener and is a professor at Conestoga College.

