

Innovative project grants three wishes to those near death to bring them peace

By Ravi Mandalia -
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Over the past decade, the cost of health care in Canada has grown 1.6 times faster than average income.

In a first of its kind project dubbed Three Wishes Project, researchers at McMaster University, Canada grant three wishes to those near death in a bid to bring them peace as well as create meaningful memories.

Researchers note that asking for and honouring last wishes helps to create meaning, memories and closure at death, and personalizes the dying process for patients and their families.

The project, initiated by lead author Deborah Cook, a professor of medicine and clinical epidemiology and biostatistics at the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine involved a researcher or patient's clinician sensitively eliciting three wishes to best honour the dying person from the patient, the family or other clinicians caring for the patient, and then finding a way to honour them.

Cook said that they developed and rolled out the project to bring peace to the final days of critically ill patients and to ease the grieving process. Cook added that they wanted to dignify patients' deaths and celebrate their lives; for family members, to humanize the dying experience and create positive memories; and for clinicians, to foster patient and family-centred care.

The study took place at the ICU of St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton. Participants in the study included 40 dying patients, at least one family member per patient, and three clinicians per patient.

Cook's research team interviewed families and clinicians to assess the program and found that 97.5 per cent of the requested wishes were implemented, at a cost ranging from \$0 to \$200 per patient.

End-of-life care was rated high by family members and post-mortem interviews with 160 family members and clinicians provided overwhelmingly positive feedback.

One patient's son said: "It gave me peace that final day — the way she went ... I think that's actually helped me in the long run ... I believe it's because the death process — the dignity that was given to her and the compassion that was shown to her family — made it much easier to deal with."

A medical resident said: "It did make the experience seem dignified and peaceful. It didn't necessarily feel like we were letting someone go; it felt more like we were wishing someone well."

The wishes were summarized as being in five areas:

- Humanizing the environment (such as bringing favourite flowers or cherished mementoes into the room)
- Personal tributes (such as having a tea party or planting a tree in the patient's name)
- Family reconnections (such as locating a lost relative)
- Rituals and observances (having blessings or renewal of wedding vows)
- Paying it forward (such as organ donation or charitable giving)

The research is published in the Annals of Internal Medicine.