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Three Wishes program offers compassion to the dying and their families

St. Joe's program grants deathbed requests to patients and family



WORD CLOUD

Courtesy of the family

William Morrell's family and ICU staff put together a word cloud to describe and celebrate the man he had been.

By [Jon Wells](#)

Death to critically ill patients in hospitals has a long history. Compassionate and innovative care at the end does not.

But the Three Wishes Project at St. Joseph's Healthcare offers patients and families in the Intensive Care Unit closure and dignity, by granting deathbed requests ranging from saying farewell to a pet to renewing wedding vows, watching sports TV 24/7, and being reunited with family members.

The project, running for two and a half years, is featured in an article in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and so far has granted wishes to 56 dying patients and their 200 family members.

It is the only program of its kind, says Deborah Cook, an ICU physician at St. Joe's, and a McMaster University professor of medicine and clinical epidemiology.

The journal article published results from Cook's study of the program, which showed 98 per cent of wish requests were granted, and feedback from interviews with families was "overwhelmingly positive."

She would love to see other hospitals follow their lead.

"I hope it inspires clinicians to have an even deeper sense of their professional calling," Cook said. "And help us remember the importance of humanism in caring for dying patients in the ICU — especially since it can be a stark technological setting."

Cook has been passionate about end-of-life care and ethics for decades; she did a fellowship in critical care at Stanford University 25 years ago, after graduating from the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine.

(Last year Cook was named an Officer of the Order of Canada for her work in critical care research; she receives the honour in Ottawa in September.)

Fifteen per cent of patients who have taken part in the program were able to communicate wish preferences, others were on life-support or otherwise unable to, and so families made the requests.

The oldest patient in the program to date was 94, the youngest 27.

Three Wishes is not to be confused with high profile wish-granting campaigns known to fly patients on final vacations or bring celebrities into hospitals.

The wishes at St. Joe's are intended to be simple and carry little cost, but be rich in meaning for patients, families, and clinicians.

A 71-year old patient had wishes granted for her dog to visit, and also her son from out of town. In addition ICU staff set her up with a laptop to Skype friends and family across the country.

Her third wish — that she not die alone — was met by providing a chaplain who sat with her singing and reading to her as she died.

The goal is bringing comfort to the dying by celebrating their lives, and easing grieving for families, Cook said, adding that it's a special critical care team culture at St. Joe's that has allowed the program to flourish.

Three Wishes helped dull the pain for Melanie Wolfe, when her dad, Bill Morrell, died last April at 69 years old.

It was a crushing blow but one blessing, she reflected, was that he'd be joining his late wife, Deborah, who died nine years earlier. Bill loved her deeply.

While he was on life support and unable to communicate his requests, family and ICU staff put together a word cloud to help describe and celebrate the man he had been — which included his roots in England, working at Nelson Steel in Nanticoke, a love of storytelling, drag racing, collecting '55 Chevys and caring for his pet fish Nautilus.

"My hat's off to the whole ICU staff," Melanie said. "They all do it so wonderfully. I don't understand why a program like this isn't done in all hospitals."

The first wish the family made was having a private room to share with him.

The second was keeping him alive long enough for family to fly from Australia.

The third was for a nurse to snap a photo when the machine was turned off and he finally left them.

A few minutes after midnight on April 17, the wishes were granted: family in a circle around his bed, including his brother from Adelaide and sister from Perth, and the moment captured in a final picture.

Bill Morrell, the storyteller, would have appreciated the ending.

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