OBITUARY

Christine T. O’Connor, R.N., M.L.S.

A lesson in dying*

In death, as in life, Christine O’Connor would not tolerate a situation that compromised her dignity. And so, when she was diagnosed with lung and brain cancer earlier this year, she chose to forgo aggressive treatment, knowing it would prolong the kind of life she did not want to lead.

From her hospital bed, she spoke with characteristic bluntness about her lifelong smoking habit. “It might be too late for me,” she told her visitors, “but it’s not too late for you.” Once she had delivered this message, she was ready to get on with death. It is reassuring, in these days of ethical struggles and headlines about suicide machines, to realize that someone can go quietly on her own.

For several years at Patient Care, Chris was our clinical librarian, colleague, and friend, not necessarily in that order. She had a no-nonsense attitude that did not suffer fools and incompetents gladly. But the stern set of her mouth was often belied by the merry gleam in her eyes, a hint of the warmer fire that glowed within. Children soon found their way to her secret stash of candy (there was always another jar on the library table for everyone on staff).

Chris died in September at Rosary Hill Home, one of seven skilled nursing facilities operated by the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne. The home was founded at the turn of the century by Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, the daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and has only two admission criteria: a diagnosis of incurable cancer and an inability to pay for needed nursing care. Rosary Hill does not charge patients or their families and does not accept payments from third-party insurers. It gets by on a steady stream of donations, large and small, and on the boundless faith of its staff.

Imagine that. Imagine a health care facility for the dying that says, “When people come to our home, they are surprised at how joyful everyone is here. But that’s because we’re celebrating the joy of life.” Imagine such a facility that says, “We cannot cure our patients, but we can assure the dignity and value of their final days and keep them comfortable and free of pain.” Imagine a death that, as much as possible, occurs the way you want it to.

How fitting it is that Chris spent her final days in the care of these special people, supported by the many friends of her life. For most of her career, Chris herself was a nurse, who not only practiced her profession but taught it to many others. Chris taught all of us that “death with dignity” does not have to be an empty euphemism. When she knew that death was near, she chose not to tap into the vast resources of medical technology. Instead, she surrounded herself with the much vaster resources of the human heart, which have always been there and will never desert us: the touch of a caring hand, the sound of a soothing voice, a gentle kiss goodbye.

Jeff Forster
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