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Abstract

Abiding the Gap Between Illness & Death: Home Palliative Care

This report focuses on the various issues related to dying at home in modern day Ontario. The Temmy Latner Centre for Palliative Care is a community palliative care service which assists patients and families to stay at home as long as possible, after the diagnosis of a terminal illness. The Centre currently offers in-home medical care and supervision by its palliative physicians and offers education and intervention to families with a specific focus on children, around dying, death and grieving.

One question that is posed is whether we “deny or detour dying” today. Whether one understands oneself to be dying, depends on perspective, choice and prognosis. With the preeminence of medicine, it is possible to focus upon medical intervention from a viewpoint of illness and proceed with such intervention until the point of death. Therefore dying is a matter of interpretation and a site of ethical debate; at some point one has the opportunity to discern when to stop intervention, or seeing oneself as “sick,” or realize one is dying. Currently dying and death are generally absent from our contemporary definitions of health and as a result, illness and dying are often overlapping and blurred, perhaps interchangeable even. The central and rather recent role of the doctor at the deathbed suggests dying may be approached by medicine as another illness.

Considering the goal of the field of palliative care is to assist people of all ages who are dying, the language used in its context is often devoid of any reference to dying or death. Emphasis is placed upon talking about dying and death, however even if such language is present, it does not mean that a conversation has occurred or shared understanding between caregiver and patient exists. The report concludes that the field of palliative care, particularly community palliative care, is necessary to reclaim the place and normalize the experience of dying in our lives.