



## Virtual Hospice

**DEREK MIEDEMA**

Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



Shelly Cory, executive director of Virtual Hospice, remembers when a distraught grandmother contacted the web-based resource. The woman was struggling with how to talk to her three-year-old grandson about his mother's terminal breast cancer.

"Our team worked together not only to provide her with that guidance, but also to help find ways that mother and son could work together on projects to create a

legacy for him," recounts Cory. "We also offered support in how she could help her grandson in the days, months and years ahead."

An easily accessible resource like Virtual Hospice that serves patients and loved ones is greatly needed. It's estimated that only 16 percent of Canadians have access to quality palliative care.<sup>1</sup> Virtual Hospice exists precisely to address the gaps in information and support.

### A virtual palliative care team

The idea for the Winnipeg, Manitoba-based website was developed by a group of palliative care leaders who recognized that Canadians need a reputable source of information and support, regardless of geographical location. Senator Sharon Carstairs (now retired) was a vocal supporter of this effort.<sup>2</sup>

The website connects people with a team of palliative care experts who provide answers to difficult end of life questions. The team includes physicians, nurses, social workers, spiritual care advisors, ethicists, a First Nations Elder and a Patient/Family Advisor.<sup>3</sup> Cory says, "Our team is very unique and rare in its range of expertise. Yet, our team is representative of the

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Institute of Health Information. (2007). Health care use at the end of life in Western Canada. Table 8. Retrieved from [http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/products/end\\_of\\_life\\_report\\_aug07\\_e.pdf](http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/products/end_of_life_report_aug07_e.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See "About Us" at

[http://virtualhospice.ca/en\\_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home+Navigation/About+Us/The+Story+of+the+Virtual+Hospice.aspx](http://virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home+Navigation/About+Us/The+Story+of+the+Virtual+Hospice.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> All quotes are from personal communication with Shelly Cory, May 25, 2015

passion people working in palliative care bring to their work” Connecting to an expert is as simple as offering an e-mail address and postal code.

Easy access is essential to the service. “Our website puts articles about managing symptoms, accessing financial benefits, and other topics at their fingertips 24/7,” says Cory.

Another strength of the site is the creation of a supportive virtual community. Cory says, “Our discussion forums are a place where people living with a life-threatening illness, caring for a dying love one, or dealing with loss and grief can connect in a community of support with others who are or have been in similar situations.”

## **Helping Canadians get through grief**

Virtual Hospice recently celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and Cory says the site is committed to identifying gaps in end of life care that can be alleviated, at least in part, by the website.

In January 2016 the organization will release a major new development on their website: a project addressing grief and the grieving process. The initiative is designed to complement local resources that site users are already accessing. Sadly, many Canadians are under-resourced when it comes to dealing with grief.

“We really want to help grieving people to realize that what they’re feeling after the death of a loved one is normal,” assures Cory.

The project will help walk people through the grieving process. Cory envisions the initiative eventually addressing unique aspects of grief associated with specific losses such as the death of a spouse or child.

## **Resources available 24/7**

Virtual Hospice is a unique organization which seeks to fill gaps in information and support surrounding palliative care. Anyone with Internet can access [virtualhospice.ca](http://virtualhospice.ca) twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Due to its online-only nature, the website cannot be expected to either replace or render local resources unnecessary. This is not its intention.

The reality is that the majority of Canadians don’t have local access to quality palliative care services. Developing such access countrywide is a pressing need.

Even if uniform local access to palliative care services countrywide became available, Virtual Hospice and the program it provides would continue to be a vital cog in the Canadian palliative care wheel.

*Permission granted to reprint in full with attribution to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada*