



“Hospice is an amazing place to work. It is a great team...”

Marie Appert

In the early 2000s, Marie Appert was one of the youngest nurses at that time to take up palliative care nursing. She was in her late 20s and a young mum.

“I was working in a rest home and hospital as well and my plan was to do midwifery but my plans changed after having my children. I applied for the hospice job when my children were quite young. Twenty years later and I haven’t wanted to work anywhere else. That shows how much I love it.”

Marie lives and farms with her husband about a 20km drive from the hospice. She takes that time to unwind and turn her focus on her own full-on life.

To Marie, the inevitable journey towards death has now been well and truly put in perspective.

“I am quite resilient in caring for patients as their quality of life subsides. Everyone’s journey is quite unique. Some fight every step and some are more accepting.

“We can tell them it’s okay to go and that their loved ones who are left behind will be supportive of their decision and will be okay.”

While most of their palliative care patients have led a full life, the toughest to care for will always be the youngsters and supporting their parents who are experiencing the reversal of the norm in losing their child before them.

“I have looked after many children. It is the parents needing support, knowing their child is not supposed to go first.”

Hospice nurses have inevitably experienced personal losses of loved ones. “I have looked after family at the end whom I have cared for. So we nurses have that empathy, that understanding.

“I think because of my job, I look at life very differently because you never know what’s around that corner and you value your family and your friends.”

Death of a loved one can bring out strong emotions and it is not unknown for them to take out their frustration on the nurses.

“Sometimes they take it out on you. We see the good, the bad and the ugly but you can’t take anything personally.” Apologies invariably follow the angry outbursts. At the end, it’s part of acceptance.”

Marie is now 51 and a grandmother and she has lost count of the number of patients she has cared for over the years. It is not unknown for people to see her out and about and introduce her as the nurse that cared for their loved one. “At first I don’t always remember them but as soon as we start talking it all comes back.”

And over those two decades she has experienced a dramatic change in palliative care. “There is lots of variety in the work. While in the past, palliative patients were mostly cancer-related now there is a 50-50 mix of cancer and medical cases such as heart, motor neurone disease and lung disease. As a result, Marie advises nurses to get solid experience before joining palliative nursing.

“Hospice is an amazing place to work. It is a great team, we definitely support each other. Hospice becomes your family. You need each other to survive in this line of work. A lot of things you learn as you go and things are changing all the time. There is now a lot more treatment available. People are now living longer. Some people get treatment right until they die now. Some people are cared for just for days to weeks, others are months to years. Some are even discharged. You get a real variety.

Marie acknowledges that caring for the dying and supporting their loved ones is not for everyone. Adaptability is an essential skill. Knowing how fragile life can be, Marie urges her own family and friends to ensure they have plans in place for the unexpected and inevitable.

One of the best tools to assist in doing this is completing an Advance Care Planning booklet, she says, which many are unaware even exists. Palliative care patients are offered it through hospice and it can be accessed through myacp.org.nz.

Marie is now looking forward to a new challenge in her career as the inpatient unit team leader. “It’s exciting. We have new staff come on board in the last couple of years.” She is looking forward to helping guide and train the newcomers and pass on her knowledge.

It is not unknown for some nurses to leave, then realise how much they valued the job and the team and have returned.

“But if you are not a team player you won’t fit in,” she warns. “You can’t do this on your own. I just utterly enjoy my job and the hospice family I work with.”

“Anyone interested should come in and talk to one of us.”