

“We can make a difference”

Sharon Campbell

Sharon Campbell is deeply passionate about the hands-on holistic care she and her fellow nurses can offer hospice patients whose end is near.



“We can make a difference,” says Sharon, Taranaki hospice’s community team leader.

Sharon graduated as a nurse in 1983 when she was among the last to go through hospital-based training in New Plymouth. After seeing the value of palliative care nursing while working in rest homes, she has now spent 11 ½ years caring for the dying.

“People say to me it’s a bit gloomy caring for the dying but I believe it’s actually a privilege to support people at the end of their life. It’s how people die is how they remember.

The job is very community-focussed with support the key. “A loved one can’t do it on their own.” There is a wide variety of support and advice they can offer to people who might never have been in the position of knowing what was ahead and no idea what may be available to them. Nurses often make referrals on their behalf to other helpful community-based support services.

“Our aim is to keep them at home if that’s where they want to be. We will do anything to support people at home if that is their wish.”

Some relationships between nurse and patient could be many months long during which time it is inevitable that they become close and personal. “We spend a lot of time with some patients. We get close to them and chat with them about the little things. It helps puts things in the real world for them.

“One particular lady was tripping away,” Sharon recalls fondly. She had enjoyed many trips overseas during her lifetime. “Her joy came from listening to our discussions about our own voyages.”

Another recent example was the close bond that developed between herself and the colourful New Plymouth photojournalist Rob Tucker and his family. Sharon says Rob gave her many a laugh sharing hilarious tales of his adventures on the job. Sipping Queen Elizabeth II’s gin when she left the room was a favourite.

“I had him on about that one! He could tell some really good stories.” Rob died recently but not until organizing a massive fundraising effort for the hospice coffers through an auction of famous photos he talked his mates into handing over. They raised nearly \$200,000, the most successful fundraiser ever for Te Kahu Pairuri Hospice Taranaki.

The hospice works hard to keep up to date. “As the hospice has moved forward, changes have been made to the referral process,” Sharon says. The focus is always on what the patients themselves want and this is reviewed on a regular basis. Some patients may even be temporarily discharged.

The hospice nurses are well loved by a grateful Taranaki community. While she highly commends the work, it is not for everyone, Sharon warns.

“I do think it’s a calling. In a lot of nursing you are dealing with one issue. On the one hand, palliative care nurses are getting to know their patient well - right through to the end of their life. “And there is nothing more rewarding than that.” And then there is the indisputable truth that you are born and you will die, she says. “I think it has taught me that you don’t sweat the small stuff.” It helps put both work and home into perspective and to value life every day.

The family support is not over when their loved one dies, Sharon points out. And nurses also value the bereavement care through checking in with the families. “It’s really important, as well as for the nurse. We call in and have a chat and a cuppa, make sure people are eating, sleeping and got support around them. “ They can also be referred to a support group and receive counselling. And it’s all free.

Nurses themselves can also receive support after the death of their patient both through the camaraderie of other nurses and take advantage of clinical supervision.

De-stressing from the intensity of the job she deals with through her love of nature, her dogs, birds and garden.

“I find having a coffee sitting on the deck and watching the birds does it for me. I just switch off.”

Now aged 62, having raised three children and with two grandchildren, Sharon has no intention of giving the job away. Even though close to retirement age, she can see herself cutting back a bit while still continuing in the role.

“I still love getting up in the morning and coming to work. And also to work with great staff.”