

Working with Dame Cicely Saunders – some memories

Professor David Oliver

Retired Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Wisdom Hospice, Rochester

Honorary Professor at the Tizard Centre, University of Kent

My first contact with the concept of hospice / palliative care was reading an article by the actor Sheila Hancock of her experiences of St Christopher's Hospice. She discussed the support that her family had received when they were at the end of their lives and this was in direct contrast to the care my father and our family had received when he died from a brain tumour only a few months before. When Cicely Saunders came to speak at my medical school, I was so impressed to hear the person who had founded St Christopher's Hospice talk of the holistic care and support to patients and their families, which left me eager to find out more.

Following this lecture, I contacted St Christopher's and was very fortunate to be able to spend one month there as a medical student, working as a nursing aide and attending ward rounds. After training as a general practitioner, I was delighted to be able to return to the hospice as a registrar. Dame Cicely was often around in the hospice and at meetings and showed her commitment to the care of patients and families, ensuring that their needs were heard and managed effectively.

During my time at St Christopher's, Dame Cicely was still working on a part-time basis and influencing the development of care there and more widely, in the UK and internationally. When I was the doctor on call over the weekend, I would be summoned to Dame Cicely's office on Sunday lunchtime. The role of the doctor at a weekend was always busy, seeing new admissions and monitoring and adjusting medication and seeing patients and families – there were 62 beds at the time – but despite all the demands it was important to meet the Dame for a sherry and conversation. It was a privilege to have this time and share experiences.

After I was appointed as Consultant at the Wisdom Hospice in Rochester, I was very grateful to attend meetings at St Christopher's, and share experiences and benefit from a wider discussion amongst very experienced and eminent professionals. Every few months there was a Grand Round where problems could be shared with the staff at St Christophers' and several former staff, who worked locally. I remember one issue I raised on a patient with increasing problems, but who would not consider leaving the house. There were suggestions by other doctors for blood tests and scans but at the end of the discussion Dame Cicely pointed out that if he would not go anywhere the decisions would have to be made by clinical assessment - listening to the patient and careful examination - and scans were impossible. This was such an important learning point for us all – the basics of clinical care, allowing the patient to tell their story and describe their problems, and hearing their and their families concerns, should never be forgotten in the rush to medically investigate.

My contact with Dame Cicely was very important for my professional career in palliative care, as the specialty developed. I have her to thank, for asking me to write a short article on motor neurone disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). This was more of an order than a request and after only three drafts it was deemed to be suitable for publication as a leaflet at the hospice. I am extremely grateful to her for this as this led me to an interest in the palliative care for MND, and later

neurological diseases. I hope that the research and training - with papers, books and presentations all over the world - have improved the palliative care for people with MND, and other neurological diseases

Dame Cicely Saunders influenced all of us who worked with her. Her example and support were so important in my formation and it was an honour and privilege to share in her work at St Christopher's Hospice.