

## Temple Israel launches Palliative Care Outreach Program

By Glenn Johnson

OTTAWA -- Temple Israel, Ottawa's Reform congregation, on Sunday held a public forum on advanced care planning and announced the launch of its own volunteer-based Palliative Care Outreach Program.

The forum, called Living and Dying with Dignity, featured medical, political and community leaders who specialize in palliative care.

Retired Sen. Sharon Carstairs, who continues to be a force for change in Palliative Care policy and the Caring Communities Initiative, put the issue in perspective for the 85 audience members.

“There's a time to live and be born and there is a time to die – and these are the only two events that every single human being has in common,” said Carstairs, a former Manitoba Liberal leader, later appointed to the Senate.

“In this country, we do a pretty good job of welcoming those newborns – at least most of them, but we don't do nearly as good a job at saying goodbye to those that are leaving us.” Last fall saw the formation of a grassroots organization called Compassionate Ottawa that resulted from a meeting of those interested in end-of-life care. That group has now aligned itself with the OutCare Foundation, chaired by Carstairs.

“I was delighted when Jackie Holzman (a former Ottawa mayor and Temple Israel member) and Jim Nininger came to me to discuss making Ottawa a Compassionate Community,” said Carstairs, whose organization has taken Compassionate Ottawa under its wing and helped it launch as an independent organization.

Carstairs told the public audience that communities need to normalize dying.

“It means a community where we all accept responsibility of making the death experience one that is accepted as a normal part of life.”

“There are things each of us can do to make the dying experience not only for ourselves but for those we love.”

Carstairs was appointed to the Senate at a time when assisted dying was in the spotlight due to the Sue Rodriguez case. Rodriguez wanted assistance to die to relieve suffering from the advanced stages of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) — also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

“People were dying in pain, or they were attached to machines they didn't want to be attached to,” Carstairs recalled. “Palliative care was essentially in its infancy.”

“Your loved ones have to know what it is that you want at the end of your life,” she said. “It can be a good story. It's never a happy story because to lose one you love is never a happy thing – but it can be a good story and that is what we all have to work together to achieve.”

Carstairs was followed in the forum by Ottawa South MPP John Fraser, the Parliamentary Assistant to Ontario's minister of health and long term care. Fraser, who left the private sector to work as an assistant to former premier Dalton McGuinty, has worked on the palliative and general health care files during his time in provincial government. But he said he began learning about it many years ago, when he was a volunteer at an Ottawa hospital.

“One thing I learned that always stuck with me is that the smallest things are the most important at the end of life – and those small things are often the most important in life. It's just that we confuse the immediate with the important. Those small kindnesses are so important in palliative care.”

Fraser said his own family experiences showed him both the great things and the areas that aren't very pleasant about palliative care.

“This is a critical issue, it's important to all of us and it's important to government,” said Fraser, who noted the province is making improvements in palliative care.

“In last year's budget, we made some significant investments in end-of-life palliative care, which I have to say it a really great start,” he said.

Fraser said the funding is about \$75 million over three years for items such as supporting the province's 35 current hospices and providing for funding of 20 additional hospices.

The lifelong Ottawa resident, who was elected in 2013, said taking care of loved ones at home takes a lot of effort – not only from family but with friends and neighbours often involved.

“People need access to quality end-of-life and palliative care – and that's the responsibility of government, of practitioners and the responsibility of the community,” said Fraser.

Noted Ottawa palliative care physician Dr. Paul L. Hacker, who is a member of Community Palliative Medicine Associates (CPMA), and a member of Temple Israel Ottawa, spoke about patient care and the critical need for community volunteers such as those from the new Temple Israel program.

Hacker worked as an anesthetist prior to moving to Ottawa 11 years ago, but transitioned into palliative care where he now is the lead physician in CPMA, a group of six primary care doctors based in the community.

“We look after people in their homes, in hospice, in retirement homes and it is probably the most rewarding work that I have done in medicine,” said Hacker, who noted that for a long time there were only three doctors who specialized in palliative care in Ottawa.

“There now are some 15 physicians doing the work that was once done by only three – but the patient load has grown exponentially. We are only one part of the care team that is needed to care for people at home, family and friends are certainly a cornerstone. We still rely on office-based and hospital-based care as well and the patient support organizations also play a big role in quality of life.”

Dr. Hacker said the work is shared by many different elements of the health care system ranging from therapists to nursing to social workers, dieticians, care coordinators to umbrella organizations such as hospice care groups and facilities.

Volunteers are integral to all settings where palliative care occurs, he said.

“You can't walk into Maycourt Hospice without first being greeted by a volunteer and seeing volunteers all down the hallway – working with not only the patients but with the families and visitors and making everybody feel at home,” he said.

“Palliative and supportive care is a team effort and everybody plays a part across the whole spectrum,” which includes specialists at hospitals and the community.

“There are things volunteers can do that no one else in the spectrum can do.”

The doctor said palliative care starts earlier for patients now due to better planning and coordination.

“We now deal with things such as symptom management and how people are going to manage at home and how different people are going to come and go from that person's life over a longer period. A volunteer can be the constant – when all someone needs is someone to have a cup of tea with and talk about what is going on. When doctors go in or nurses, we have a task to do, but the volunteer is the central thread that provides consistency and relationship building and socialization, which is very important.”

Hacker said volunteers are ready and trained for their roles and are a central thread as family members are often not ready for the role that is suddenly there for them when a loved-one's health changes.

That's one of the reasons Temple Israel wants to create and train volunteers who can help members of the Jewish community and their families.

“In Jewish terms, it is really one word -- chesed – kindness,” said Temple Israel Rabbi Rob Morais in describing the foundation for the outreach program.

“It’s a sense of our obligation to be kind and be compassionate to all those who need it and to recognize the kind of care people need at different points throughout their lives and how we struggle with that in the decisions that we have to make and the ideas we are faced with.”

Pamela Cogan, chair of the Temple's Social Action Committee and organizer of the conference, said her career as a Respiratory Therapist at the Ottawa Hospital General campus places her in close contact with patients and their families when she works in Intensive Care or Emergency.

“In the hospital, we care for many people who have not prepared for their death or even denied that their death was coming – the impact of this is most often felt by family members who are starting to grieve and who are just slammed with last-minute decisions that have to be made.”

She said that's why programs like those advocated during the forum are so important.

“With an Advanced Care Plan in place, a lot of this can be easier and the time of death can be focused on the dying person – the loved one. Support from a volunteer visitor can be so special and helpful ... whether it is listening, praying and it is very good to have someone who is there to support the person and also give the family much needed rest and breaks.”

Cogan said visiting the sick is an important part of Jewish life as an act of loving kindness.

“We are going to offer support, comfort and companionship both to those who are in the Temple Israel family, to those not affiliated with any synagogue in the Ottawa Jewish community or to anyone who reaches out to us for support – you don't have to be affiliated or even Jewish.”

**For those interested in training as Visitors to those in our community in Palliative Care, please email [socialaction@templeisraelottawa.ca](mailto:socialaction@templeisraelottawa.ca) or call 613-224-1802**