

The Catholic Doctor is In

Lessons from My Mom's Dying

As I walked through the hospital earlier this week, someone wished me a very late Happy New Year! I smiled and wished her one back, but I spent the rest of the day wondering: What does it mean to have a Happy New Year? Is it possible? What will that phrase do to me next year? You see, my mother died on New Year's Day.

Mom was in terrible agony for six weeks before she died. My family and I were happy she was finally out of pain. We were also devastated that we no longer had her with us. I had read that the day she died was the birthday of her new life. We celebrate each saint's day on the day of his or her death, not birth. What better birthday could there be than New Years Day? - I'm not ready for that answer yet.

I want to pass on just a few bits of what I have already learned from the dying process of a loved one. I'm sure most of you have been through this already and could add to my list.

Ask for help! Prayer is very powerful. God always listens, and his answer may be 'no', but it may be 'yes'. So if you think someone you love is in danger of dying, ask for help. Call up a prayer line. Put it on Facebook. Ask your friends to pray. Pray to the saints. My mother's friends even organized a meeting at church to pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet together. I was very grateful for that, especially in the hour of her death when I was too distracted to pray it myself. Pray for conversion, if that is needed.

Be there for your loved ones. Do not expect there will be another day to resolve conflicts or to get questions answered. Talk to them about what they are afraid of. Make sure their spiritual needs are being met. Beware of Living Wills and POST forms; the Catholic answer to these is a combination document that spells out principles of end of life care *and* authorizes a personal representative to make decisions for you if you cannot. An updated will may be necessary. Don't forget to ask questions about desired funeral mass songs and readings and burial choices, if that is important to the dying person.

You never know when some general knowledge of Catholic medical ethics regarding end of life, such as the sort of information mentioned in these *Catholic Doctor is In* columns, could come in handy. If you are involved in decision making in any way, be

sure to ask questions of the doctors that come by. Write things down. Make sure you understand what is being treated and why. Decisions should be made together by the patient and physician. Think ahead of time about who you could trust to call if you suddenly need help in making ethical decisions. The National Catholic Bioethics Center (<http://www.ncbcenter.org/>) is available for phone consultation if you are faced with tough choices.

Remember, even in times of great suffering, be kind to others. Try to be friendly and show the love of God to those you see. They will often respond in kind. However, be an advocate for your family member and make sure he or she is getting the care needed; speak up if you think something important is lacking.

Keep praying even after someone dies. We are not supposed to assume that even the most saintly person we know will go straight to heaven. Purgatory is a state in which the person is saved, although he is suffering and can't help himself by prayer. So continue praying for the souls of the people you know who have died. Offer up sufferings for their benefit. Talk to your parish about having masses said for those people.

Finally, remember that it's OK to grieve. Grief is a normal reaction – don't bottle it up - and the process takes months to years. Share what you are feeling with your family; they will understand.

Dr. Julie Bryan is an internal medicine physician and the secretary of the Dr. Jerome Lejeune Guild of the Catholic Medical Association. All health professionals are welcome to join. Visit www.fortwaynecma.com.

Reprinted with permission from Today's Catholic newspaper, Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend