

## **The Catholic Doctor is IN**

### **Perinatal Hospice—The Time Has Come for Fort Wayne**

The concept of perinatal hospice was initiated over 30 years ago by Dr. Byron Calhoun, an obstetrician and fetal/maternal medicine specialist currently practicing in Charleston, W. Va. He urges communities to offer an alternative to the automatic decision to abort unborn babies diagnosed with fatal fetal anomalies such as trisomy 13 or 18.

Dr. Calhoun, a committed Christian, believes and has demonstrated that when the inherent value of even the smallest and youngest of human lives is honored, their families benefit. Experience over the years has shown that there is improvement in the grieving process and fewer marriage breakdowns when perinatal (around the time of birth) hospice is chosen. According to [perinatalhospice.org](http://perinatalhospice.org), perinatal hospice and palliative care is an innovative and compassionate model of support that can be offered to parents who find out during pregnancy that their baby has a life-limiting condition. As prenatal testing continues to advance, more families find themselves in this heartbreaking situation. Perinatal hospice incorporates the philosophy and expertise of hospice and palliative care into the care of these very young patients. Perinatal palliative care helps parents embrace whatever life their baby might have, before and after birth. Dr. Calhoun explains that the unifying concept in hospice remains the holistic approach to the physical, emotional and spiritual support for dying patients and their families. The core belief in hospice is to offer treatment of the dying that respects their dignity and sees them as truly alive and not yet dead.

Hospice support begins at the time of diagnosis, not just after the baby is born. It can be thought of as “hospice in the womb” (including birth planning and preliminary medical decision-making before the baby is born) as well as more traditional hospice and palliative care at home after birth (if the baby lives longer than a few minutes or hours). Palliative care can also include choosing medical treatments intended to improve the decision-making before and after birth and assisting families through their grief. Perinatal hospice also enables families to make meaningful plans for the baby’s life, birth and death, honoring the baby as well as the baby’s family. As Catholics, we know the inestimable value that conferring the sacraments of Baptism and anointing would gain for such a child.

Perinatal hospice is not a place; it is a frame of mind that can easily be incorporated into standard pregnancy and birth care. Ideally, hospice care is provided by a comprehensive multidisciplinary team that can include obstetricians, perinatologists, labor and delivery nurses, neonatologists, neonatal intensive care unit staff, chaplains and social workers as well as genetic counselors, midwives, traditional hospice professionals and others. Perinatal hospice is a beautiful and practical response to one of the most heartbreaking challenges of early prenatal diagnoses.

Local medical professionals with perinatal hospice experience have an interest in establishing this service in Fort Wayne. Since no charges are made for perinatal hospice care, our community must develop a source of funding to make local perinatal hospice a reality so that attending nurses and social workers can be paid.

Ideally, a local perinatal hospice, operating under an umbrella nonprofit corporation, will be available at each local medical facility that delivers babies. Several of us are exploring these possibilities and welcome any suggestions, business, experience, prayer and financial support that would allow us to bring this to fruition.

If you have questions or an interest in helping establish a local perinatal hospice, please contact me.

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