

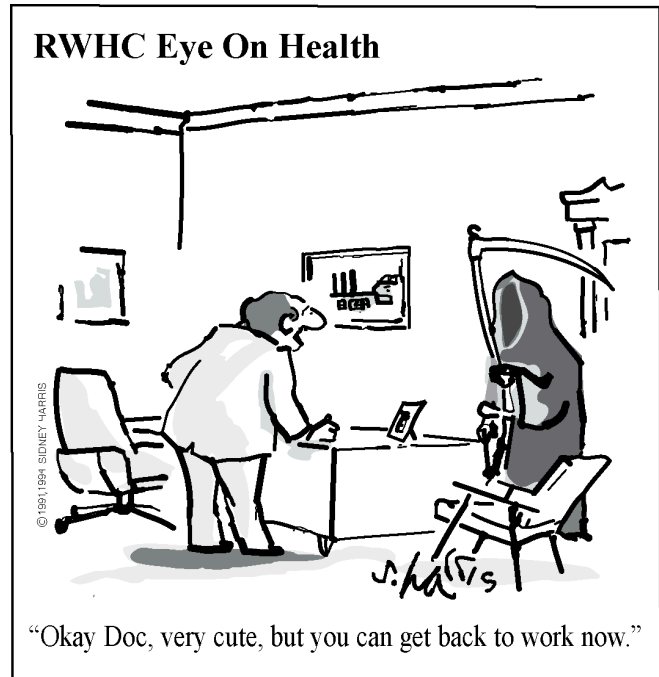
What Do We Want When Our Time Comes?

by Tim Size, Executive Director, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, Sauk City

The shouting heads on the talk shows recently sunk to a new low in their ongoing mission to misdirect the American people. One of the national health reform bills proposed encouraging doctors to discuss end of life options with patients and families. Radicals with their own agendas twisted this into a Government plot to set up “death panels.” But it is lemonade out of lemon time. We now have the long overdue opportunity to talk about what it means to our health care when we joke “none of us gets out of here alive.”

Martians may land here tomorrow. Congress may start listening to the larger number of us who don’t shout for a living. So yes, trying to help patients and families deal with tough end of life questions can be twisted into something sinister. But when each of our time comes, most of us don’t want end of life heroics. We want to be treated with respect, to be embraced and to die free of pain.

“The practice of advance-care directives is widespread and accepted. It includes living wills with explicit instructions about what should be done for individuals in final illnesses, and what should not be done. It allows people to make ethical, legal, moral choices about treatments, prolonging life, and when additional treatment should not be pursued.” (AARP website)



“The questions are critical, even if some people find them difficult to contemplate. Should a feeding tube be installed when the patient can no longer be nourished by mouth? Should a ventilator be attached when breathing independently becomes difficult? If the patient has severe dementia, should antibiotics be used if pneumonia develops? Should cardiopulmonary resuscitation be attempted if the heart stops beating?” (*The New York Times*, 8/17/09)

The National Institute on Aging offers a comprehensive 68-page booklet produced under President George Bush's Administration. *End-of-Life: Helping With Comfort and Care* provides "an overview of issues commonly facing people caring for someone nearing the end of life. It can help you to work with health care providers to complement their medical and care giving efforts." Individual free copies can be obtained through the institute's web site, www.nia.nih.gov, or by calling 800-222-2225.

While such resources are extremely helpful, I suspect most of us would also appreciate our physician or practitioner's guidance regarding our end of life options. And in America, we tend to get what we pay for.

In the meantime, I hope the Government's end of life booklet won't be silenced as well. Most of us understand the wisdom in Ecclesiastes: "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest...."