



Photo submitted

Touching Lives at critical times

Recently retired, Mary James has been called 'brilliant' for her work in end-of-life care.

Photos by Lyle Cox

by Kathy Oxborrow, for *The Bulletin Special Projects*



Mary James, who retired from Hospice House at Partners In Care in June, will be a hard act to follow, according to her colleagues.

Her expertise in end-of-life care and her teaching and mentoring skills are brilliant, her co-workers say.

"Mary's technical skills are amazing," said Allison Vogt, her Hospice House supervisor. "The amount of information stored in Mary's brain is just unbelievable."

But it's just not Mary's scientific knowledge and nursing skill that elicits praise; it's also her ability to comfort patients and their families in one of life's most difficult times, all while maintaining a professional boundary.

Vogt said that is a hard lesson for some nurses to learn.

"Mary has been a great example for other nurses in how to portray confidence and expertise without getting too involved in the grieving,"

she said. "It's not the nurse's job to grieve with the patient."

Bend's Hospice House is a specialty hospital with seven beds for patients whose pain symptoms need to be handled in a clinical setting. Managing crisis situations is often required.

Sometimes patients would come to Hospice House screaming in pain, and Mary had a knack for approaching each situation with a calmness that was contagious, even to the patient.

"I have witnessed Mary manage six crisis situations at once and be able to support and educate families in the midst of the chaos," Vogt said.

James began her nursing career in Virginia, with career stops in Missoula, Mont., Eugene and finally Bend.

While on a fly-fishing vacation in Missoula, James fell in love with the area and decided to move there. In Missoula, she studied with Ira Byock, the doctor who authored the book "Dying Well" and who is

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considered a national expert in palliative care — relieving and preventing the suffering of patients.

Byock is now a professor at Dartmouth Medical School.

“He would invite students to his home once a month to read articles about hospice,” James said. “He was a wonderful mentor.”

In addition to administering medication, James’ expertise includes using therapeutic touch, a treatment during which she transfers healing energy to her patients to ease their pain and help them calm down. (See side bar for more information about this therapy.)

As a hospice nurse, James not only has a stethoscope, a blood pressure cup and medicine that she can pull out of her bag of tricks. Therapeutic touch, she says, is another tool she can use. In doing so, James said people really heal themselves; all she does is facilitate them to relax and use her energy to help them make a shift.

Sometimes patients would come to Hospice House agitated and thrashing in pain. James would try morphine or other pain medicines in an attempt to get them to calm down, but sometimes to no avail. It is during these instances when she would utilize therapeutic touch.

“I would take my hands and run them over their energy fields, look out the window and think of a beautiful place in nature, and by calming myself down I was able to calm the person down,” she said.

James remembers one patient who was in excruciating pain and needed to be taken to the hospital for a spinal injection because the pain medicine wasn’t working. He needed to be calmed down so she could get him on a stretcher.

“I took his hand, sent him energy and took him on a guided meditation,” she said.

Not only did he fall asleep, but family members in the room did as well. James was then able to place him on the stretcher for travel to the hospital.

Vogt said James really set the standard for what care would be when Hospice House admitted its first patient in 2003.

“Mary’s clinical expertise and extensive nursing experience have given the Hospice House the reputation that it has,” she said. “Its success is largely due to Mary and her excellent nursing practice.”

When asked about what she learned in her 41 years of nursing and working with dying patients, James points to the importance of just being quiet



with a patient, of just watching them and listening to them.

“It’s not about me,” she said. “It’s about the patients and what they’re going through. It’s about giving them dignity. It’s about giving them comfort.”

Although James has retired from Hospice House, she still intends to provide hospice care as a private duty nurse. She’ll also continue to train nurses for St. Charles while making time for those fly-fishing excursions.



Therapeutic Touch

Mary James describes therapeutic touch as energy work.

“It’s like Reiki in that you put yourself in a peaceful place and think of a beautiful place and then send peaceful energy into the patient,” she said.

James uses therapeutic touch to ease pain and anxiety in dying patients.

Delores Krieger, who was a professor of nursing at New York University, and Dora Kunz, a natural healer, developed therapeutic touch in the 1970s. James studied with both of these women.

Practitioners of therapeutic touch place their hands on or near a patient to manipulate the patient’s energy field.

Many colleges and hospitals teach therapeutic touch in Canada and the U.S., and it is promoted by many nursing organizations. St. Charles Medical Center retains James to teach it to its nurses.

According to the American Cancer Society, an American Hospital survey conducted in 2005 noted that about 30 percent of 1,400 responding hospitals offered therapeutic touch. Thousands of health care professionals, mostly nurses, have learned this type of therapy worldwide.

Many nonprofessionals have also learned the technique.

Therapeutic touch is not without its detractors. Critics cite the absence of scientific studies proving that it works. Some small studies have been conducted in which the researchers concluded there was no evidence to support the claims of therapeutic touch practitioners.

— Kathy Oxborrow, for *The Bulletin*