End-of-Life Decisions, Part III

Robert E. Yahnke
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In two previous columns devoted to end-of-life decisions, reviewers evaluated five videos that provided a variety of perspectives on this complex topic. Caring at the End of Life (Vol. 43, No. 1) focused on the reactions of patients and their families, the decision-making process relating to continuing or withdrawing life-sustaining treatment, and the fallibility of health care providers. Two other reviews in that column employed more personalized and expressionistic techniques to convey their themes. Grave Words: Tools for Discussing End of Life Choices used humor and enacted “skits” to train health care staff to discuss options with patients and families. Self-Deliverance: Assisted Suicide in Australia portrayed one angry old man’s struggle with his cancer and his advocacy for voluntary euthanasia. More Than a Failing Heart (Vol. 43, No. 2) provided insights on issues relating to improving communication with patients and families and addressing their emotional needs at the end of life. The Way We Die: Listening to the Terminally Ill addressed the unmet psychosocial needs of patients and their families. Adequate and clear communication between doctors and their patients was a recurring theme.

The two videos reviewed in this column add to the tools offered in those previous columns. Those Who Stay Behind: When a Family Member Is Dying complements some of the resources available in Caring at the End of Life and The Way We Die: Listening to the Terminally Ill. The video offers a number of first-person accounts of family members who reflect upon the concerns they faced as their loved one died. The video provides a specific list of the challenges faced by families when a family member is dying. The Journey Home: Stories From Hospice adds the dimension of hospice care to five stories of patients and family members sharing their experiences. Specific characteristics of hospice care are emphasized: the wide-ranging levels of care and the interdisciplinary health care team approach. The most compelling quality of both videos is their emphasis on letting viewers hear the articulate and often eloquent voices of patients and family members as they make their way through what, for them, is uncharted territory.

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