

Script – Broadcast – Understanding hospice

INTRO

When it was announced last February that former President Jimmy Carter was going to receive hospice care at home for the remainder of his life, it was assumed by many that he was nearing the end of life.

But now, more than six months later, the oldest-living former U.S. president is still living under hospice care and the goal remains the same – to make Mr. Carter as comfortable as possible with the time he has left.

While the average length of stay in hospice is 90 days, there are many people who die within a few days or some who live well past three months.

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Hospice is covered by private insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid. For people who continue to live past the six-month mark, a hospice medical director or hospice doctor will need to recertify them for insurance to continue covering the cost of care. Dr. Whelan says she's cared for people for as many as two years in hospice.

Dr. Sarah Whelan is the medical director for OSF Hospice and Outpatient Palliative Care in Rockford, Illinois. She's cared for patients in hospice for as long as two years.

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Dr. Sarah Whelan, medical director for OSF Hospice and Outpatient Palliative Care, Rockford, Illinois

"A lot of people come on hospice care right at the end. And people will think, oh, you're going to die within a couple of days if you go on hospice care, and while that's true, unfortunately, those patients didn't get to benefit from all that hospice has to offer. But you can live quite a while on hospice care. Some patients will live past that six-month mark, as we've seen with Jimmy Carter, and that's, I think, a good thing. They're benefiting from the services we have to offer and having that quality time that they want at home and hopefully their symptoms managed so they can enjoy that time at home." (:37)

TAG

Finding the right hospice program for you or your loved one may seem daunting, but it doesn't have to be. Dr. Whelan says to ask for referrals, don't be afraid to ask questions about the services such as pain management, and make sure you are totally comfortable with your decision.

While hospice won't change the eventual outcome, the ultimate goal is to offer much-needed support to the patient and loved ones during those crucial last days or weeks.

Dr. Whelan adds that there are more than medical issues at the end of life and that hospice can help patients write that last chapter the way they want to.