

Unique website answers a thousand questions about life's most difficult journey

Canadian Virtual Hospice marks important milestone as it shares end-of-life information via the Internet

WINNIPEG, MB – October 19, 2009 – Questions about end of life are as old as humanity, yet they can be new and overwhelming when someone we care about is dying.

The palliative care professionals at Canadian Virtual Hospice (www.virtualhospice.ca) provide answers to these age-old questions using modern information technology. Today the unique web-based service announced an important milestone that shows just how effective its approach can be.

This fall, the website answered the one-thousandth question through its *Ask a Professional* feature, which invites patients, families and health care providers to submit personal queries about terminal illness. Each question is handled by an inter-disciplinary team of palliative care experts, who provide detailed, personalized, confidential responses addressing the medical and emotional concerns that arise during terminal illness.

In return, the team has received hundreds of grateful comments from people across Canada, who use words like “godsend,” “amazing,” and “torch of hope” to describe the value of the service.

Dr. Harvey Max Chochinov, Chair of Canadian Virtual Hospice, said the intimacy and accessibility of the Internet provides unique opportunities to bridge gaps of time, geography and personal isolation.

“So often, the most anxious questions arise in the lonely hours when doctors’ offices are closed, or they may seem too personal to share with even the most trusted care giver,” said Dr. Chochinov.

“Our service is highly personal and individualized, and yet completely private – a safe place to ask any question and seek help with any troubling feeling. And it provides ready access to the type of specialized expertise about palliative care that may not be available in every community.”

With identifying information removed to protect confidentiality, some of the responses are also posted on a section called *Asked and Answered*. This collection of 80 frequently asked questions covers matters of the body and spirit during life-limiting illness, from managing pain and weight loss to talking with children about death.

The *Ask a Professional* team includes doctors, nurses, a social worker and a spiritual care adviser, all highly experienced in end-of-life care. The service is fully bilingual.

Dr. Mike Harlos, the lead physician consultant for Virtual Hospice, says one of the goals is to raise the bar for what palliative care can achieve.

“It isn’t about dying – it’s really about living, just as much as any other type of medical care would be. The right information can make a huge difference in making difficult decisions about care, navigating through the health care system and improving quality of life for the patient and those around them.”

The website is designed for anyone dealing with end-of-life issues, including patients, their families and friends, healthcare providers and counsellors. Last year, the website was visited about 30,000 times a month.

Most questions submitted to the site, including the one-thousandth question, have dealt with some form of cancer. Almost half of the questions have come from health care providers, and half from patients and those around them. The highest proportion of questions originated in Ontario, followed by Manitoba (where Virtual Hospice is based) and British Columbia.

The website offers several other features in addition to *Ask a Professional*. The most widely used is the *Topics* section, a collection of reliable articles on a spectrum of concerns, including symptom management, tips for visiting and care-giving. The articles are a convenient resource that health care providers can print off for their patients and families.

Other useful features of the website include *The Glossary*, a list of plain-language definitions for common palliative care terms; *The Exchange*, where Canadian researchers, clinicians and other leaders in palliative care can share the latest research, best practices and innovations in peer-reviewed articles; and *For Professionals*, a collection of key resources and new tools for people working, volunteering and conducting research in palliative care.

About Canadian Virtual Hospice

Canadian Virtual Hospice is a fully bilingual online resource staffed by experts in palliative care that provides information and personalized support to patients and families facing life-threatening illness and to the health providers who care for them. Virtual Hospice can be found at www.virtualhospice.ca and www.portailpalliatif.ca. Virtual Hospice operates with the support of the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and CancerCare Manitoba.

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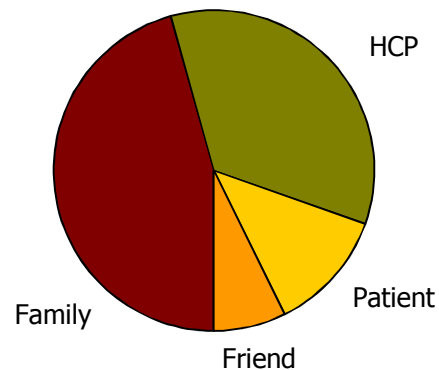
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1,000+ Questions Answered Through *Ask a Professional*

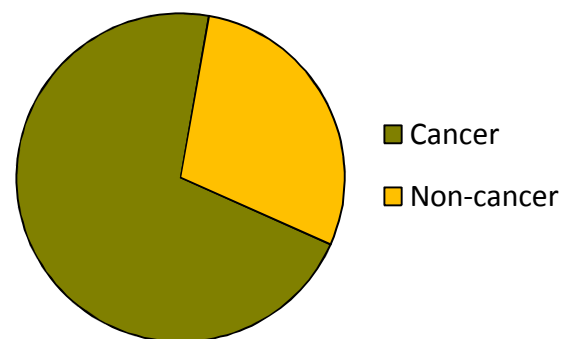
Who is asking questions?

- About half of the questions come from family and friends of people with terminal illness, and one-third from health care providers. About one in every six questions comes from a patient.
- The health care professionals asking questions include: physicians, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, spiritual care advisors, educators and program administrators.
- By province, the top five users of the service are:
 1. Ontario
 2. Manitoba
 3. British Columbia
 4. Alberta
 5. Quebec



What are they asking about?

- Most questions deal with terminal illness symptoms and psychosocial concerns, such as anxiety, depression or simple uncertainty about how to relate to a person with terminal illness.
- More than half of these questions deal with matters of both body and spirit, reflecting the close relationship between the medical and emotional challenges of terminal illness.
- A significant number of users are seeking information about programs and services in their areas, as well as guidance in developing palliative care programming.
- Of questions concerning specific types of illness, those related to cancer out-number questions about other illnesses by more than two to one.



What kind of feedback has the website received?

Here are some excerpts from the hundreds of comments sent to the Canadian Virtual Hospice website.

From patients and their families:

"Your site will be invaluable to our family."

"I thank God often for you."

"Thank you so much for not just the information but your kindness."

"I am hoping to share (your website) with the congregations with which I am in relationship."

"It will give my husband and me a start-point for decision-making."

"This website fits my schedule and allows me to know that other people feel the same way I do."

"What you have said has eased my mind to no end."

"This will certainly be a great help in my process of acceptance and grieving."

From healthcare providers:

"You have really helped me to...concentrate on what is most important for this client."

"This is a great support to those of us in remote communities especially."

"It is great to have a resource of professionals in this field to help one."

"Thanks so much for the up to date research."

"You can depend on CVH's assistance for that extra reassurance for your palliative questions."