

## Don't dread death

By HATTIE BERNSTEIN, Telegraph Staff

[hbernstein@nashuatelegraph.com](mailto:hbernstein@nashuatelegraph.com)

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In matters of dying and death, there are four words that strike fear in the hearts of mortals: "We need to talk."

Avoiding the talk, however, is a recipe for disaster.

It's also the reason a statewide grassroots initiative, "Reclaiming the End of Life," is holding a series of forums across the state, including one from 6-8:30 p.m. June 13 at at Rivier College's Dion Center.

The program is free. Dr. Ira Byock, a physician and author who is spearheading the initiative, will lead the session.

Byock is a professor of anesthesiology and community and family medicine and director of palliative medicine at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon.

He said the initiative, a small, mostly volunteer effort, addresses a national public health crisis.

"All of us who are mortal should worry about the way we will live through the last chapter in our life," Byock said. "Too many suffer needlessly at the end of life."

Also unnecessary is the stress placed on caregivers emotionally, physically and financially, he said.

Citing national studies, Byock said the U.S. has models and money to improve health care for frail elders and those who are ill and dying, as well as their caregivers.

"The biggest barrier is we're not talking about it," he said. "On any given day, we're talking about Iraq, Iran, global warming, because they seem more compelling, less depressing than the fact that our parents, our friends and relatives will age and die."

In taking the message on the road, Byock and his steering committee hope to encourage the discussion. They'll also survey those who attend the public forums and invite New Hampshire residents to attend presidential candidate forums to raise questions about their positions on end-of-life care.

The Nashua forum will be the fourth of eight in a statewide series that ends in July. Forums have been held in Littleton, Laconia and Manchester.

Byock said New Hampshire is the logical place to begin, given the state's demographics. More than 12 percent of state residents are 65 and older, and by 2030, the number is expected to rise to 20 percent, he said.

"The New Hampshire population is aging faster than the rest of the United States," Byock

said, attributing that trend in part to the number of retirees moving into the state.

Byock said research, including some funded by the Robert Wood Johnson and Soros foundations, reveal money is available in the health-care system to care for the frail elderly, those ill and dying, and their caretakers.

Fragmentation and lack of coordination are the rule, however, mostly because policymakers have stuck their heads in the sand, he said.

"We're doing everything we can to avoid death in our conversations, decisions and frankly, in our clinical practice," Byock said. "We treat disease at all costs until there's absolutely nothing left to offer, and the result is many people die badly."

Byock said an estimated 60 percent of Americans die in a hospital, 20 percent in an intensive care unit. Thirty percent or more die in a nursing home, and between 25 percent and 30 percent die at home, he said.

Further, the quality of life at the end is generally poor, he said.

Pain is managed poorly. Care is fragmented. And individuals and families are "pauperized" by the expense of caring for the chronically ill, he said.

"We can't change the fact that we're mortal," Byock said. "But we can address the fragmentation, poor attention to supports, the pauperizing. These we can fix."

The initiative is good news to health-care professionals such as Dr. Don McDonah, medical director of the Circle of Life/Palliative Care program at St. Joseph Healthcare in Nashua and medical director of the hospice program at Souhegan Home & Hospice Care.

McDonah said he plans to attend the forum.

"It's very important in this day and age that we start to talk about what we're doing at the end of life and what we want done to us at the end of life," McDonah said. "We need to increase awareness that we don't need to be uncomfortable at the end of life, that people can live where they want to and be assured they will be as comfortable as possible, so we can live 'til we die."

Likewise, Tanya Prather, patient-care volunteer coordinator at Home Health & Hospice care in Nashua, is looking forward to attending the June 13 meeting at Rivier College.

A Nashua resident who has worked for the community hospice organization for five years, Prather said she has been encouraging hospice volunteers to attend the forum. She also is urging them to meet the presidential candidates and challenge them to take action.

"It's an important issue, but people haven't had a way to share what their challenges are," Prather said. "Hearing about this, people feel empowered to make a difference."

Registration is not required, but forum organizers are asking residents to sign up online by visiting [www.reclaimtheend.org](http://www.reclaimtheend.org) or by calling 369-7860.

**Hattie Bernstein can be reached at 594-6439 or [hbernstein@nashuatelegraph.com](mailto:hbernstein@nashuatelegraph.com).**