

Woman wants candidates to improve care

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CONCORD – Patricia Patten, of Nashua, is eager to tell the story about her mother's agonizingly long, final days if it helps inspire presidential candidates to improve end-of-life care in America.

"My story is not unique, but I am very vocal about it," Patten said during an interview Tuesday.

Gloria McGinnis, 75, spent six days at Southern New Hampshire Medical Center before succumbing to complications from pneumonia.

"Those six days seemed like an eternity," Patten said.

She had suffered from Alzheimer's disease and rheumatoid arthritis for several years. On the advice of her attending doctor, husband, Joseph, and Patten, she decided against having surgery to treat cancer cells found in her lungs.

The day after that decision, Patten came in to find a young surgeon preparing her mother for cancer surgery.

"I had to refuse it for her, even though she had a do-not-resuscitate order," Patten recalled, declining to name the doctor.

"The doctor said, 'Well, you think about it, and I'll come back in half an hour.' He made me doubt myself, and you don't want to doubt yourself when it is time to let someone go." Earlier, Patten said, she battled with one doctor who refused to prescribe sedation or anti-pain medication.

"Finally at 2 a.m., and with my mother screaming in pain, one of the nurses said, 'Let me call him.' Unfortunately, I had to – in a not very polite manner – tell him just what my mother needed. The next day, he came in and gave her the pain medication," Patten recalled.

With nurses not available round the clock, Patten often dressed, turned her mother and reapplied restraints, as her mother had become very combative.

"I did things that I should, really, never have done," Patten said. "But when they could be there, the nurses could not have been more wonderful. The one that stayed at the end shed a tear with me."

Hospital officials would not comment on this case.

Southern New Hampshire updates its policies on end-of-life care decisions at least every three years and did so in the past year, according to Dr. Stephanie Wolf-Rosenblum, vice president of medical affairs.



Patricia Patten, of Nashua, holds up a photo Tuesday of her late mother, Gloria McGinnis, who died of complications from pneumonia six years ago at Southern New Hampshire Medical Center. McGinnis said her mother's six days in the hospital "seemed like an eternity." While there, a mix-up over her mother's do-not-resuscitate order nearly led to her having surgery she had already refused, and a doctor refused to prescribe sedation and antipain medication.

For example, at least five years ago, the hospital began to place DNRs in a bold, red sleeve that is easily seen by any doctor looking at a patient's chart.

Wolf-Rosenblum stressed that people need to talk with loved ones and make their wishes clear before becoming seriously ill or unable to make decisions.

The hospital's community medical school is sponsoring a panel discussion on the subject Oct. 22.

"When you enter the hospital, that's really not a good time to be deciding about advance directives. It can be a very compressed time, emotions run high," Wolf-Rosenblum added.

An advocacy group, Reclaiming the End of Life, reported Tuesday that more than 90 percent of those interviewed said they wanted their choices honored, dignity respected, timely referrals to hospice care and hoped their families would not left with debt from decisions made about their survival.

The results came from the 450 who attended eight community forums throughout the state last spring.

Ira Byock is director of Palliative Medicine At Dartmouth Medical Center in Lebanon.

"The barrier is not financial. It is cultural, because it is so depressing, so complex, so daunting, to talk about this subject," Byock said. "As a result, the culture of the medical-care system, absent the right information, is to sustain them. We don't stop them from dying, but they just die poorly. For those left behind, there can be nothing worse than that."

The eight major Democratic presidential candidates debate tonight on the campus of Dartmouth College. The New Hampshire Democratic Party is lead sponsor of the 90-minute forum that begins at 9 on WBZ-TV locally and MSNBC nationwide. New Hampshire Public Radio is also providing a live broadcast.

Groups promoting better treatment for those with chronic medical conditions and awareness about breast cancer also announced Tuesday their own plans to buttonhole candidates.

Byock said state and federal laws should change so pain medication can be more easily prescribed, all medical and nursing students are taught about end-of-life care, Medicare should expand access to hospice and all private insurers should have to cover hospice care.

"This is one crisis that we can solve," Byock said. "Speaking as a baby boomer myself, I say we as a generation have to grow all the way up."