

40 STORIES IN 40 YEARS

Barry Whelan



As a spiritual and pastoral care worker, Barry provides support to both patient and their families throughout their end of life journey.

“It brings a great deal of satisfaction and personal fulfilment that my involvement can make a difference in people’s lives. The connections you make with the patients and families are so valuable, ongoing and lifechanging.”

Barry has been involved in palliative care since 1997, working in the pastoral care teams at both Dandenong Casey Palliative Care and in the palliative department at Monash Health. In 1997, he took on a position at Palliative Care South East as a spiritual and pastoral worker, a role he is still actively working in.

“As a pastoral care worker, my role involves supporting and walking with patients as they are confronted and

struggle to come to terms with their prognosis and with their final stages of life. A major part of what I do is to help patients explore their current emotions and ultimately help them accept the reality of death and dying.”

“I get a lot of referrals to visit people who have been diagnosed with terminal illnesses and only have a few days, weeks or months left to live. Most people today usually expect to live to 80 plus years, and when they are told that they will be dying a lot earlier than expected, it brings about many questions, a milieu of new emotions and concerns. The “Why” questions - how will I die? When will I die? Why me? Why now? What will happen when I die? What about my family? These are natural responses and reasonable questions to ask and part of my role is to walk with them and gently support them during this time.”

“Pastoral care is spiritual care. It is about caring from people and helping them approach the end of their life.”

As well as working in a support role for patients, Barry and the team at Palliative Care South East established a bereavement support group that is open to people who have lost their loved ones.

“People are invited to gather and have a meal with others who are suffering the same kind of loss. There is great effort and acknowledgement from palliative care, clinicians, volunteers and trained helpers who offer continuity of care for the families of patients they work with.”

“Over the years, I have seen huge growth in palliative care. When I first started there were nurses, pastoral care, counsellors, and bereavement support workers – that was it. Now the teams have extended to encompass occupational therapy, social work, nurses, pastoral care, music therapy, art therapy, counselling, and understanding administration.”

“Support services have also expanded. Not only is there support for patients but families and other people who are affected by the person’s death are provided with grieving and bereavement support, counselling and other programmes to help them cope with the loss.”

“There has been immense development over the years to a point that palliative care is now streamlined and there is an effective system care for people either at home, in a hospital setting or in communities.”

“At present, I think palliative care is on a very good trajectory and we should continue on the way we are going. Medication and treatment opportunities keep advancing, and we’re also involving alternative services that will help patients with pain such as meditation and music therapy.”

“What has helped us with the progression of palliative care are organisations like Palliative Care Victoria (PCV). During the start of my career, we worked within our own regions. However, by working with peak bodies such as PCV, we’ve had greater opportunities to network, obtain research, and have been offered an ability to bounce ideas and share experiences with others.

“Palliative care is about helping people come to terms with the reality of death and dying, what death means and how it affects that person and other people around them.”

Barry believes there is a wholesome aspect to palliative care and describes the work as “spiritually fulfilling.”

“Palliative care assists individuals to be at peace with themselves, their past, their families, their communities and also their beliefs. As spiritual care workers, it is not our role to

impose a particular belief system or structure into a patients mind – we simply help them find comfort within their own world.”

““It has been a wonderful privilege to spend the last 24 years of my working life in such an environment. It brings a lot of joy and pleasure that my work is meaningful and can make a very real difference in people’s lives. The connections you make with the patients and families are so precious, ongoing and lifechanging.”

“The reason I love working in palliative care is that it provides a unique opportunity to support and be there for people who are in a dark time in their lives. It gives me a sense of purpose to know that my presence and support can make this phase of their lives a little more meaningful and hopefully brings them to a state of acceptance and peace. (as well as their families). Being born and dying is a natural process and I endeavour to assist them to accept and understand that.”

“I have so many memorable encounters over the past 24 years in making more than 25,000 visits, but I especially enjoy visiting older people (I’m practising to be there myself one day) and encouraging them to reflect on their lives and share their memories and experiences over the years. As they near the end of their lives they often don’t have much to look forward to, but by looking back and sharing their wisdom and reflecting on their achievements and contributions to their families and their communities in general, it gives meaning and value to their many years.”