

National Symposium on Care for Those Involved in End-of-Life Care Draws Full House

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“The entire culture of health systems approaches illness and dying through the lens of a medical problem,” said Dr. Ira Byock, Chief Medical Officer for the Institute for Human Caring of Providence Health and Services, and Professor at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. “But illness and dying are deeply personal experiences for the individual who is ill and the people that love that person.” Byock, a 2014 recipient of HealthCare Chaplaincy’s Pioneer Award, was addressing the Buddhist Contemplative Care Symposium for palliative and end-of-life care in November at the Garrison Institute in Garrison, New York. The event was co-sponsored by the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care founded by Robert Chodo Campbell and Koshin Paley Ellison. (Read what they have to say about the symposium [here](#).)



“Communication and the Interpersonal Relationship within Palliative and End-of-Life Care,” explored the issues and evidence that contemplative-based techniques can help not only patients and their families, but physicians, nurses, social workers and others involved in that care. The purpose was to develop compassion and mindfulness among practitioners, helping them to be more “present” with patients struggling with their final days, and featured leading practitioners of palliative and EOL care. In addition to Byock, Dr. Rita

Charon, Dr. Diane Meier, and Dr. Bruce Miller, made presentations.

Byock, whose most recent book is [The Best Care Possible](#) (2012), added, “We can look at the future as if we were shoulder to shoulder with a patient on a journey neither of us could choose perceiving what is possible to have value or meaning to the person without it in any way discounting or diminishing the unwanted fact they can’t reverse the illness.”

“To the extent we can recognize something about patients, we get recognized back,” said Dr. Rita Charon, who founded the field of narrative medicine, which recognizes the value of people’s narratives in clinical practice, research and education. (A story about Rita Charon, [“Story Telling Skills Can Improve Healthcare: The Emergence of Narrative Medicine,”](#) was published in the November 16, 2011 issue of PlainViews.) “That’s where the joy comes from for us. It’s not just counting lung nodules on the x-ray. It’s being present in the room with the patient and making things better. It’s not always what we can fix with a pill or another radiation treatment.” Charon is founder and Executive Director of the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, where she is Professor of Clinical Medicine.

Dr. Diane Meier, director of the Center to Advance Palliative Care and also of the Lilian and Benjamin Hertzberg Palliative Care Institute, spoke about the importance of body language in the healthcare setting. She described situations where medical personnel sit with arms crossed, which implies there is no openness. In this [video](#) Meier explains how physicians should conduct conversations as their patients approach the end of their lives.

Meier is also Professor of Geriatrics and Internal Medicine and Catherine Gaisman Professor of Medical Ethics at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. She is the Principal Investigator of an NCI-funded five-year multi-site study on the outcomes of hospital palliative care services in cancer patients.

Dr. Bruce (BJ) Miller, executive director of the Zen Hospice Project, hospice and palliative care specialist at UC San Francisco Medical Center, spoke about the therapeutic value of beauty, sensory fulfillment, and the aesthetic domain for terminally ill patients.

“There is more and brighter capacity within the experience of professional caregiving and the experience of living and dying than our American culture currently recognizes,” Byock pointed out. “That is a conversation our culture desperately needs to have. The human capacity for well-being during illness and dying is an open secret that should be the next big idea in our culture.”

(In photo above: Ira Byock center, with from left, Mitchell Levy, BJ Miller, Radhule Weininger, Michael Kerney, Robert Chodo Campbell, Rita Charon, Koshin Paley Ellison and Justin Burke. Photo by Mary Remington)

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