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## Our View: Lawmakers should support improving palliative care access

Why it matters: Sufferers of chronic diseases and conditions deserve equal access to palliative care.

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Among the many issues the state Legislature is tackling this session, improving access to palliative care may not grab the big headlines other topics do. The issue, however, deserves close attention when it does arise.

Palliative care involves caring for the person as a whole rather than just the chronic disease or illness a patient is suffering from. Not only does palliative care address physical illness, but it includes the emotional, social and spiritual sides of dealing with sickness, using a team approach to help the patient. Hospice is the natural extension of that care when it comes to the end of life.

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network in Minnesota is making palliative care a priority for good reason this legislative session. The network cites a number of barriers when it comes to this type of care, including limited provider and consumer understanding about palliative care; uneven access to palliative care in different hospital and community-based care settings; and a shortage in doctors, nurses and other staff trained to provide palliative care.

As a result, the group is working on legislation to establish a state advisory committee to identify barriers preventing access to palliative care. The panel's mission would be to help lawmakers identify gaps in health systems, consumer education, workforce development and promote solutions that will bring palliative care to more Minnesotans.

Palliative care itself is a not a new thing. Doctors, nurses, social workers and others in the health care field have been informally providing this type of service and attention to a number of patients for years. Mankato has had a formal program for about five year. But access to the care is not available for every patient, depending on where they live, how much they know about available services and how much family support they have.

Everyone deserves a chance to minimize suffering in trying times of illness. The former CEO and president of the Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato, Dr. Greg Kutcher is now medical director of the system's hospice and palliative care program. He says getting to know people in their own environments is key to the care. The husband of a patient who recently died said the program helped him as much as his wife, providing the support and care for them both.

Kutcher said he thinks this type of care is underutilized. He said even the terms associated with it are negative — “putting” people in hospice. In reality, Kutcher said, it's a decision they and their loved ones make, approved by their doctor and often covered by Medicaid or Medicare.

Making sure Minnesotans have access to such a complete form of care is a cause every lawmaker should be able to support.

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