

# Life's sunset

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I work as a physician in Outram Community Hospital. As part of a multidisciplinary team, I provide palliative care to patients who are near the end of their life. When I share with people what I do, I often receive comments such as “Your work must be so challenging” and “I can’t imagine how you all do this”.

Looking back, I certainly did not foresee that I would end up in palliative care. My grandparents brought me up and my first experience with death was their passing. My grandmother was tragically involved in a fatal road traffic accident. My grandfather was never quite the same after that. On hindsight, I now know that he was grieving, but my younger self neither realised that nor knew how to comfort him. When he eventually got ill and passed away, I remained as a mere bystander.

This brings some regret and so, I treasure the opportunity I get to work with the dying and their loved ones. Over the years I’ve provided palliative care, I have gained some life lessons.

## More is not always better

Medical science has come a long way and continues to advance today. But there are still many medical conditions which remain incurable. Beyond a certain point, treatments and medical interventions may be ineffective but instead, incur physical discomfort, emotional stress and financial burden. It is at this point that many patients prefer to focus on being as comfortable as possible and revolving their life around what matters most to them.

## Death need not be scary

People usually imagine dying to be an uncomfortable or painful process, but this may not be true all the time. In some cases, the end is akin to the peaceful entry into an eternal slumber. When there is physical discomfort, the clinical team can usually help to alleviate it with meticulous care and medication.

In the wards, I often see the loved ones of a dying person by the bedside, hesitant about what they can or should do. I think that people often underestimate the impact of gestures of love. With some loving words, a warm touch and simply being present for the person, a big difference can be made to the dying person last moments.

## Live well to leave well

Each individual regards the prospect of facing the end differently. Some are composed and prepared, facing it with

utmost grace. Some are anxious and hung up about things, which are undone or unsettled.

Common regrets, as captured by the book “The Top Five Regrets of the Dying” by Bronnie Ware, include: (1) not living a life true to oneself, (2) working too hard, (3) not having the courage to express one’s feelings, (4) not staying in touch with people, and (5) not letting oneself be happier.

My time spent with my patients has taught me the poignant lesson to live in the present, for time becomes the most important asset when so little of it remains. This helps me let go of petty concerns and instead develop gratitude for what I have while not being resentful for what I lack.

Another aspect of life that becomes increasingly important for most people with limited time left is the ability to spend time with those dear to them. It can be ironic that we spend much of our life chasing material possessions like money when towards the end, these become insignificant when compared to relationships. Maybe we should reflect if we are investing our efforts into what really matters, and if we truly will have as much time with our loved ones as we think we do.

## The end can be beautiful

Just like how the sunset can be one of the most breathtaking moments of the day, or how a candle burns brighter before it goes out, the end of life can be a transformative period for everyone involved.

For the patients, this is when they are most authentic and focus on what really matters most to them. For the people around them – including their healthcare team – this period of tenderness often creates lasting memories that contribute to the person’s legacy.

In my view, what my colleagues and I do in the Outram Community Hospital’s palliative wards is more than a job. To me, it is a priceless experience to care for another human being during such a special chapter of their life. We get to understand them as individuals, help them be at peace as well as to live and ultimately leave in dignity. I cannot imagine a greater privilege and I am thankful to all of my patients who have allowed or are allowing me the chance to do so.

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