

Case Study - Barb

Patient is a 69 year old female – “Barb.” A retired librarian. Single, no children. Has two brothers, one local, and one older sister (deceased 5 years). Patient occasionally speaks by phone to her out-of-state brother. Patient used to be involved in the lives of her nephews and nieces but they all “have busy lives” and/or “live out of State”. One of her brothers is somewhat attentive, and is supportive. He lives a 30 minutes’ drive from patient. Patient has long-time friends that also come to visit. In past chaplain visits, Barb has expressed deep sadness at, because of her illness/treatments, not being able to attend the children’s graduations. However, she also spoke of looking forward to the birth of her nephew’s baby.

About 18 months ago patient was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer and has under gone surgery and chemotherapy for this. She also suffers from debilitating arthritis, and morbid obesity. She has chronic renal impairment, neuropathy and hypotension.

Barb was raised Catholic but left the Church many years ago. For many years she attended Willow Creek Christian Church but is no longer involved or able because of her failing health. She has faith and welcomes prayer and chaplain visits. This is the patient’s 6th admission to the hospital over a 9 month period. Barb has seen a chaplain at least once on each admission.

This admission was for progressive renal failure, deconditioning, sepsis, and hypotension and the patient now has metastatic cancer to the lung. Oncology is saying she is no longer a candidate for chemo treatment.

Patient seen in the ICU.

Chaplain 1: Hello Barb, it’s Lee the chaplain – how are you doing?

Barb 1: Oh yes, chaplain – how are you? *(Her demeanor is familiar and pleasant. Patient has demonstrated a strong sense of humor during other visits and has recognized it as a means of coping)*

Chaplain 2: Well I’m fine, but what about you? I’m sorry to see you had to come in again; what happened?

Barb 2: I was at the oncologist’s office and wasn’t feeling well, and they sent me to the emergency room. I’ve some sort of infection.

Chaplain 3: Oh, that’s hard. You’re at home alone, if I remember rightly? Did you come by yourself to the oncologist?

Barb3: I got a ride to the office yesterday. Just me and Snowy in my condo. My neighbor has a key and so she was able to go in and feed Snowy and clean out his litter. She’ll keep an eye on him for a few days. Cats are good at being alone.

Chaplain 4: Pets can be great company and it's good to have neighbors willing to help out in an emergency. So how has life been going for you these past few months?

Barb 4: Okay, the home health people come in a few times and then my brother will come over once a week. He takes me to the shop, but sometimes I'm not able to even get into the cart to drive around so he'll take the list and pick up what I need. ... I've not been able to go to church for a long time but I watch it on TV sometimes, which helps... *(there's a change in her tone and demeanor)*

Chaplain 5: "that helps...?"

Barb 5: It gets lonely sometimes... my nieces and nephews don't phone me or offer to come over to visit... they are all too busy with their own lives, but I was there for them when they were growing up...*(silence...not quite needing to compose herself, or check her anger, perhaps)*

Chaplain 6: You were a good aunt, I bet... The last time you were in you were looking forward to your nephew having a new baby, right?

Barb 6: Yes, they had a baby girl. I've just seen pictures. I've been too sick to go anywhere, and they haven't come over to me... I shouldn't have to be the one making the phone calls. None of them have reached out to me. I've a niece, an oncology nurse in Michigan, she called once or twice to ask how I am... but she hasn't come over to see me even once. I have some friends who call and do visit, but it's not the same as family. I think they don't want to bother with an old, sick aunt... it hurts. And it feels lonely... the cancers and treatment have taken over my life... someday I feel too tired to keep at it – I still want to live, I'm not ready to go yet! *(she speaks a little lighter, trying to bring in some humor to liven her own spirit)*. I do want to see the new baby! I love babies, they are so 'there' and engaging... they're not too busy!

Chaplain 7: Feels like the cancer has taken over your life...what are the doctors saying about your treatments?

Barb 7: They are saying I can't have any more treatment, it's too far gone. I don't want to suffer like my mother did. She was DNR but my father rescinded it because he didn't want to let her go, and she suffered before she died. I don't want that. I don't think anyone would stop me being DNR. I want to be DNR when the time is right...I don't know what to do. It's so lonely...my brother does what he can, but my niece and nephew...they should call me...

Chaplain 8: Do you think it would be different if they knew how sick you are? *(Barb shrugs her shoulders)* Perhaps if you were to call your niece or nephew and share a bit more of what's going on for you?

Barb 8: Maybe... *(Nurse and transport interrupted the encounter as the patient had to go for a test. Chaplain reassured her of prayers and availability)*