

Rev Charity Ngaruiya, PhD, BCC
Monthly Chaplaincy Update- May 2024
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May has been a very busy month at LA General Medical Center with several events, including hospital and nurses' week. We held a memorial for the staff members who departed last year, during which I read the poem *"When Great Trees Fall"* by Maya Angelou. Following the memorial, some family members, staff, and guests released pigeons in the memory of the departed souls. As staff, we also celebrated the leapfrog award, in which LA General received an "A." Amid all these activities, I had the opportunity to cover palliative care while the staff chaplain was away on leave. During this time, I supported several patients who were nearing the end of their lives or were terminally ill in various units in the Inpatient Tower. I would like to reflect on a few of these palliative care visits and one other encounter during this month.



Staff @ LA General celebrating the "A" score from LeapFrog!

"Can Someone Help Me Die?"

I first met Marge (pseudonym) while rounding on one of my units, and during that first visit, she seemed very uncomfortable and restless while lying on the bed. As I offered her support, Marge shared that she had just found out she had cancer and was wrestling with what to do next regarding treatment. She went ahead to share that the most important thing to her was not to be in pain or suffer until she died. I conducted a life review, where Marge revealed that she was born and raised outside the United States, and for several years prior to her departure, she cared for her mother until her death. She described some of the things she had done to help her mom, who lived until her nineties, be comfortable until the end. While speaking about her mother, Marge mentioned that she was estranged from her two sisters, who had disagreed over their mother's care, and felt as though they had abandoned her until her final days. Marge left her home country after their mom passed away, and for several years she had been traveling through South America and visiting friends. Since she was not feeling well, she finally decided to come to the United States to see a friend and get herself checked out.

When I asked about Marge's faith preference, she mentioned growing up in the Christian faith and attending a Presbyterian church in her country. Her faith continued to be important to her, though she had no connection to a particular church. Marge then went ahead to bring up the issue of dying again. "I really want to know if someone can help me die because I do not want to be in pain or suffer until the end." She noted that she was originally from a country that allowed euthanasia, so she knew it was possible for someone to choose how they die. At that moment, a staff member interrupted my visit with Marge to check on her well-being, and I asked her if I could

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keep her in prayer as she made decisions about the next steps in her care plan, to which she answered, “I need all the prayers.”

The next time I saw Marge, it was during a palliative care visit, where I discovered that she had moved to the cancer unit and was transitioning to comfort-care as she prepared for her final days. That afternoon, when I visited, Marge was slightly awake, and she looked at me briefly before drifting back to sleep. I stayed present for support, and later, when she seemed more awake, she nodded “yes” when I asked if I could pray for her. After offering a prayer, I observed that Marge seemed to be uncomfortable and decided to check in with the nurse, who shared that they were medicating her as needed. She also confirmed that no one had visited to see Marge.

I made several visits with Marge, both to cover palliative care for spiritual support and to check on her well-being, as she had no visitors at the bedside. On my last visit, Marge was unresponsive, so I sat near the bed, said a prayer for her, and read Psalm 23 near her head so she could hear it. As I walked out of the unit, I checked in with the nurse. During our conversation, I inquired about the fate of Marge's remains, given that she had not notified her family or friends. I decided to follow up with the palliative care social worker, who shared with me the different options available in LA County for disposing of the remains and the time frame for claiming them. Later, I learned that the palliative team had reached out to her sisters, who were grateful for the information about her passing. They were expecting that Marge would have gone back home on hospice, but as things turned out, "God had other plans.”



Chaplains With Supervisor Hilda Solis during the Staff Memorial

“Chemo not working but I am not ready to give up!”

One of the visits I made as a referral from palliative care was with a patient who I met in January when I first started at LA General. A cancer patient, Sally (pseudonym), had returned for treatment, and they asked me to check on her because she was not doing well. Sally was on the fifth floor in one of the short-stay units I had not visited before, so I had to ask around until I found it. She was awake and sitting on the bed when I entered the area where her bed was. I noticed that Sally seemed frail and, due to chemotherapy, had lost her hair, which, as I recalled, was styled in beautiful cornrows the first time I met her. She immediately looked at me as I greeted her and placed her phone on the bed next to her. We briefly discussed various topics before I inquired about Sally's illness. She told me that she had just spoken to her family, who are back in her country of origin, and her three children were all doing well. Sally

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smiled as she noted that they were asking her when she would go home to see them. I noticed that talking about her family was meaningful to Sally, and she later shared that she was planning to travel to see them and had already booked a ticket. She then went ahead to reveal that the chemo was not working and that she had just received disappointing news from the medical team that the tumors had not shrunk. Then, with determination in her voice, Sally said, "But I am not giving up; I want to keep doing treatment, and I will wait and hear what they recommend."



Willie Foster- April's Volunteer of the Month; delivering blankets to patients in 7B, our cancer unit at LA General

As Sally shared her plans, she was planning to go home and visit with her family for three weeks, then come back so she

could continue with cancer treatment. We discussed Sally's treatment over the past few months, and she mentioned that the chemo was hard on her body, so she stayed at home. She had struggled to eat over the past few months, and she had very limited energy to cook or do anything else. So, she talked about her days spent in bed listening to gospel music while praying. As I asked Sally what she was longing to do when she got home, she shared about her love for the beach and that she was planning to book a room somewhere near the beach so that she could relax and just enjoy herself. She was also eager to indulge in the local cuisine that her mom would prepare for the family. Sally then went back to her health issues and blurted out, "I am not ready to give up, so I told the doctors to see if there is another chemo I can do." In her words, I noticed that Sally was determined to fight the cancer no matter what was going to happen. We prayed before I left, and Sally appreciated my visit with her. The next day, I returned for prayer with another chaplain, and Sally appeared more hopeful, anticipating a biopsy before her home discharge.

I was still thinking of my visits with Sally when the palliative care team requested that I follow up with her and see if she had arrived in her home country safely. When I texted Sally, she responded, "**I just arrived; thank you very much 🙏.**" My support for Sally is ongoing and will depend on whether she decides to come back to the US or not.

"Mom, I know you chose dad over the baby!"

As previously noted on Wednesdays, I normally cover the L&D unit on the 3rd floor. One of the weeks in May, I discovered that the team had postponed the palliative care meeting due to a patient visit. Consequently, I made the decision to begin my rounds early. During one of my visits, I

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met a mother who was preparing to deliver after a fetal demise. When I arrived, she was awake and talking to her family on the phone. After she finished, I introduced myself as a chaplain, and the mother went ahead to share her story about the loss of the baby. She had been feeling unwell for a few weeks and had several health issues, but she made the decision to terminate her pregnancy due to two other main reasons. One reason was that when she gave birth to her daughter, her dad passed away, and she remembered feeling sad and depressed, unsure of how she had survived or dealt with the grief. She remembered how difficult it was to cope with a new baby, and she did not want to go through it again since her grandmother was in hospice and near death.

The other reason involved her desire to reconcile with her ex-husband and after several discussions with him, the mother decided to terminate the pregnancy since he was not the biological father. She went ahead to share their story of breaking up after eight years of marriage, and during that time, she met the father of the unborn child. The mother kept quiet for a few minutes then expressed her opinion that this guy "would not have been a good father." However, her husband continued to insist that he could not be with her if she chose to keep the baby, only to later retract his decision and say, "But it's your decision." The mom shared how she had struggled with what to do and kept on going back and forth about it until she came to the hospital. I validated the sadness, guilt, and grief that the mother was feeling, and with desperation, she noted that "it is already too late to change anything now," as she was just waiting to deliver the fetal remains. I stayed present for support as the mother talked about the unborn baby, who would have been a boy, and the images she saw of what he looked like. As the visit ended, she noted that her six-year-

old daughter told her, "Mom, I know you chose dad over the baby."



With Barbara and Alyss while receiving blankets from First Pres Newhall!

Prayer Items:

- Pray for patients end of life and their families as they deal with grief.
- Pray for those dealing with chronic or terminal illnesses and are frequently admitted for complications related to treatment like Sally.
- Also, continue to pray for women dealing with losses of children.
- Pray for the ongoing ministry of chaplains at LA General Medical Center.

Donations in Kind: Hygiene kits, Men's pants & Adult Diapers (Can be dropped off at St. Camillus-1911 Zonal Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90033).