



# Comfort Care

*A quarterly newsletter for staff, patients, family and all people interested in end-of-life care.*

## *Music Thanatology: Clinical Music in Palliative Care*

By Anna Fiasca, Music Thanatologist, SacredFlight

Music thanatology is a palliative medical modality employing prescriptive music to tend the physical and spiritual needs of those nearing the end of life. The field has been developed over the last 30 years by Therese Schroeder-Sheker, founder of the Chalice of Repose Project. Music thanatologists offer harp and voice at the bedside to serve patients in many healthcare venues to meet fear, discomfort, and suffering, with the therapeutic qualities of music and compassionate presence.



Clinical music choices are based on diagnoses, symptomology, psychosocial factors and careful observation.

Working closely with breath and other body rhythms, the music thanatologist offers musical elements to support the complex physical, emotional, and spiritual processes encountered by those approaching the end of life.

The music used draws from many traditions, both sacred and secular. It is specifically selected and formulated in the moment to respond to each individual patient. No two deaths are ever the same, nor are any two vigils. For this reason vigil music is never pre-recorded; it is always a live, human-to-human musical delivery.

Music vigils make a difference for patients and their families. Some common responses for the patient include decreased pain, deeper rest, reduced anxiety and fear. Dr. Lynn Keith, a resident at Legacy Health System,

recently observed a vigil. Afterward she remarked that the patient's body relaxed visibly and sank deeper into the bed. She also noted decreased respiration rate and blood pressure and increased oxygen saturation.

Families also can find space in the music for reflection and processing of grief and other emotions. One man was in terrible anguish at the thought of losing his wife. He wept inconsolably at her bedside, telling her he could not bear to let her go. During a music vigil he was able to work through his grief and encourage her to "go to the light." He assured her that he would be okay and that she could go when she was ready. Within minutes, she breathed her last breath and died peacefully with her husband at her side.

Music thanatology has been aptly described as 'healing without curing.' As palliative care providers we see death as a natural part of the life cycle. Broadly speaking, our aim in the vigil is twofold: to support the patient and family in working through the many physical, emotional and spiritual issues they are facing and to help the patient achieve a "blessed" or conscious, peaceful death.

Our role is to tenderly and carefully midwife these processes. This means no less than to be quietly, warmly, and lovingly present to the vulnerability and suffering of body and soul in the dying process.

It is a profound privilege to be with patients and their families in this most intimate and sacred time of transition. These brave sojourners are our teachers in the art of living and dying with patience, courage, and love. To them we extend our heartfelt gratitude.

### SacredFlight



SacredFlight is a palliative music practice serving terminally ill and dying patients and their families in the greater Portland community. Trained at the Chalice of Repose Project, a two-and-one-half year graduate level school in Missoula, Montana, their music thanatologists use harp and voice to support patients nearing the end of life.

Since June 2001, they have provided more than 300 vigils for patients in hospitals, hospice, and long-term care facilities. These musical deliveries usually last 30–60 minutes and can be beneficial from the time of terminal diagnosis onward, up to the moment of death. Multiple vigils can increase the effectiveness of the therapy for patient and family alike.

SacredFlight's music thanatologists are on call from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. Anyone involved in the care of a patient (e.g. physician, nurse, chaplain, social worker, family member, etc.) can request a vigil.

To make a referral, call the pager service at 503-241-3344. For more information, visit their website at [www.sacredflight.org](http://www.sacredflight.org)