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Fear of Death



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ABSTRACT

Shortly before his death in 1995, Kenneth B. Schwartz, a cancer patient at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) founded The Kenneth B. Schwartz Center® at MGH. The Schwartz Center® is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and advancing compassionate health care delivery, which provides hope to the patient and support to caregivers and encourages the healing process. The center sponsors the Schwartz Center Rounds®, a monthly multidisciplinary forum where caregivers reflect on important psychosocial issues faced by patients, their families, and their caregivers, and gain insight and support from fellow staff members.

For many, cancer is synonymous with death. Fearing death is a rational response. For too long, medicine has ignored this primeval fear. Increasingly, clinicians recognize and address end-of-life issues, facing patients' and our own emotional

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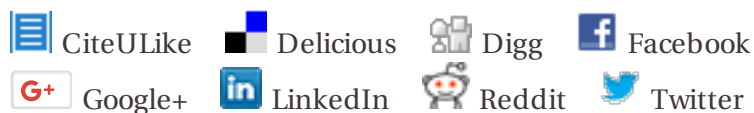
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vulnerabilities in order to connect and explore problems and fears. Listening and learning from the patient guides us as we acknowledge much of the mystery that still surrounds the dying process. Rarely is there a simple or right answer. An empathetic response to suffering patients is the best support. Support is vital in fostering the adjustment of patients. A silent presence may prove more helpful than well-meant counsel for many patients. Through an examination of eight caregiver narratives of their patients' experiences, the role of the health care provider in the dying process, particularly in regard to challenging fear, is reviewed.

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