Video chat device gives hospice patients peace of mind

Karen Gugala of Northville works the triage center at Angela Hospice. A new "telehospice" program allows patients to video chat with nurses. (Photo: Submitted)

A computer tablet capable of connecting its user to a nursing station for face-to-face communication is changing the way one local hospice reaches out to its patients.

Angela Hospice in Livonia received a $2.1 million grant from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation to start a “telehospice” program that allows patients to video chat with nurses via computer tablets.

Dubbed Angela’s Virtual Assist, the devices have been available since January for patients who live at home or in senior living centers. The hospice added another 25 tablets this month, bringing the total to 75. Angela Hospice serves approximately 270 patients, some of whom live
in skilled nursing centers and the hospice’s care center in Livonia. AVA users live throughout southeast Michigan.

Karen Gugala, AVA coordinator and a Northville resident, says Angela Hospice is the first organization of its kind in southeast Michigan to use video chat with patients.

“The reason we’re doing this is to be able to help the patient more efficiently before we get to their home. It’s a way for us to do bedside nursing until we can have a person physically there with them,” Gugala said. “The family is able to send a signal to a triage station and a nurse calls back. If a patient has a wound or a family member is having trouble knowing how to care for a symptom, we can guide them.

Angela Hospice’s computer tablet, AVA, offers video communication between patient and nurses. (Photo: Submitted)

“It has helped in giving families a quicker response. Trying to explain something over the phone is very hard to do. Just being able to see them has helped us to guide them. It has exceeded our expectations.”

The AVA tablet is meant to enhance weekly visits from hospice nurses, as well as lower patient anxiety.

“Just having it in the home is a huge decrease in anxiety,” Gugala said.
One recent holiday, an at-home caregiver needed help changing a patient’s dressing. A hospice triage nurse guided the caregiver through the necessary steps, communicating via AVA. Another occasion, the staff connected a patient’s AVA tablet to cellphone users at a family wedding. The patient was able to “attend” the event virtually and talk with the wedding party.

“The surprising thing is even if they are not using it, they feel it’s a fantastic tool that gives them peace of mind,” Gugala said.

**Easy to use**

Nina and Edmund Knittel of Plymouth Township have kept an AVA tablet at home since May, when Edmund was released from the hospital and began receiving hospice services.

Nina hasn’t used the tablet’s video capabilities, but she dutifully responds to a set of patient questions she receives via the device every week. Using a stylus, she indicates if her husband needs more medication and describes how he is feeling. Anything out of the norm triggers a call from a triage nurse.

“I think it’s a wonderful thing,” Nina said. “It’s not that complicated. It’s like FaceTime.”

Patients who use AVA at home may take the device with them if they are admitted to Angela Hospice’s care center. The tablet runs on a 4G network system rather than Wi-Fi.

“We don’t feel we need to use it in skilled nursing facilities because nurses are already there. But we’ve looked at assisted living homes,” Gugala said. “We are branching out.”

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