

Death and the Irish, celebrating the good on St Patrick's Day

This weekend people all around the world are celebrating being Irish on the anniversary of St Patrick's death



With this in mind we thought rather than focus on where we need to improve, instead in celebration of life in Ireland, we want to share what we are doing *right*.

If you have been following these articles, you'll know they are an attempt to work through the People's Charter on Dying, Death and Bereavement in Ireland.

This article will focus on the line:

'My dignity is respected and maintained to the end of my life, and after my death.'

So, what do we do well?

In Ireland we have a long tradition of managing death in a healthy and positive way.

Much of what we do to deal with death and dying, grief and loss comes from a long line of rituals, rites and traditions. It is through the maintenance of these rituals that Irish people bring comfort to one another at a time of crisis.

Some of these rituals once included the community in a very personal manner where the death occurred at home as it did so often in the past. It would have included perhaps

washing, tending and laying out the body, a final show of love and respect for the deceased by the family or close friend or neighbour.

Many traditions have stood the test of time, especially the Irish wake. Stories of 'merry wakes' have passed through generations many achieving that harmonious mixture of 'mirth and melancholy'. Even today the wake or removal provides an opportunity for friends and neighbours of the deceased to pay their respects.

Often, we go the extra mile. We make tea by the gallon, we help clean the house for the many visitors (if the wake/removal is in the house), we prepare the food, we direct the traffic, we plant flowers, we do what needs doing whatever that may be.

As a collective we work together. We care. We act. Even in the saddest of occasions we do not stand back, we come together. It is something to be very proud of. In essence, we are try to make the unbearable bearable.

We know, given a choice the majority of us would choose to die at home. This is reflected in our latest Haveyoursay research, but the 2600 people surveyed also acknowledge that dying at home may not always be possible.

In reality, less than a quarter of us die at home. We die in hospitals; in nursing homes, in hospices. We die unexpectedly; and it's not perhaps as we would imagine or hope for. We need to mitigate the difficulties on these occasions.

The Irish Hospice Foundation is putting tremendous effort into making deaths better in hospitals, homes and nursing homes across Ireland.

Anyone who has had the benefit of being witness to hospice care talks about it being personal and compassionate with a focus on both the person in the bed and the people beside the bed.

The Irish Hospice Foundation's Hospice Friendly Hospitals (HFH) Programme aims to bring the best of the hospice into the acute hospital setting. It includes a number of initiatives like the end of life symbol which is displayed on wards and on a patient's door to let staff and visitors know that a death has occurred and they should be mindful and respectful of the deceased and the grieving loved ones.

I am sure many of you will remember not so long ago when 'bin bags' may well have been used to return the belongings of the person who has died to their relatives or friends. The Hospice Friendly Hospitals provide a lovely handover bag. It is a far more dignified way to bring home the personal effects from the hospital and is initiative that has been copied in other countries, including as far away as Australia

It can be little things that make the most impact, and HFH in conjunction with the staff of Irish hospitals are continually trying to make things easier.

In University Hospital Limerick, their End of Life coordinator decided to make the walkway through the hospital to the mortuary less 'clinical and grey'. It winds through the engine of the hospital, past the mail room, and onto an outside cement path. Thanks to HFH grants, he, along with some dedicated staff and help from volunteers, cleared the path, put pictures on the wall, planted some flowers, and bought a bench.

"It's not much," he says "but this is a difficult journey people are taking. If we can provide a little place where they can just have a moment – then it's critical we give them that."

Another part of HFH is the Design & Dignity project. It includes a series of family rooms specially designed to give privacy and comfort to families convening at a hospital at the end of a loved one's life.

One person who used one of the family rooms with his eight brothers and sisters said the following:

"We were able to avail of the privacy, comfort and facilities of the newly-refurbished Relatives' Room. It was a place for us as a family, and other families, to take some time out, or to discuss end-of-life decisions about our much-beloved mother. We were able to talk, and indeed cry, in a comfortable, private, dignified area. It's also a room where family members can get a quiet cup of tea or coffee, get some rest, or indeed even just charge up mobile phones."

In the same hospital (Beaumont), their End of Life coordinator likened the relative's room to the 'good room'. Applying what we know to the relative's room, she said;

"They are still part of the unit, but away from the hustle and bustle and sometimes frightening and overwhelming areas. Family members can sit in a calm and tranquil room where they can just take a breath and reflect.

Thanks to the Design & Dignity refurbishment work, our Visitors' Rooms are now transformed into a beautiful space – a well thought out and planned area, where family members can have tea or coffee, or stay the night if needed.

Family and friends are our VIPs, and knowing we have a lovely well-planned room where they can go for time-out also helps take some of the stress out of our working day. But most importantly we feel very proud to have these facilities available for the family members and friends of the loved ones for whom we care."

If you have had a beloved family member or friend die in a hospital, then you will understand the importance of the 'little things'. The simple things, like having somewhere to charge your phone, or to put your bag, make a cuppa, make someone else a cuppa – these simple ordinary things make us feel at home. They are essential.

The IHF is very proud of the work we are doing for End of life in Ireland. We are proud of our colleagues in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes (which will be the focus of a future blog) and other health facilities.

Our training also supports staff in making them more competent, more confident and more

comfortable in supporting patients and families through dying, death and grief. We know each day there are heroes all around Ireland doing the extraordinary and today on St Patrick's day we commend you. We celebrate the ordinary, the simple, the kind and the compassionate. We cannot change the loss – people still die and those they leave behind are still bereft – but we do strive hard to mitigate the pain in any practical ways we can.

On St. Patrick's day we borrow the words of the late John O'Donoghue in this extract from his beautiful poem "Beannacht" (Blessing):

*May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
may the clarity of light be yours,
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.
And so may a slow
wind work these words
of love around you,
an invisible cloak
to mind your life.*

Happy St Patrick's Day

To find out more about Hospice Friendly Hospitals – [go here](#)
For more information on the People's Charter – [visit here](#).

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The IHF is a national charity, set up in 1986 to fund and develop hospice services. Since then, we have expanded our scope to encompass the key issues affecting the end of life. Our programme and services now seek to address the needs of people dying at home, in hospitals and in other care settings, as well as the needs of the bereaved. We also promote discussion of a broad range of issues related to dying, death and bereavement, in order to identify what matters most to Irish people at the end of life.