

with Margret Meagher



THE ART OF good health

My Aunt Pattie died two weeks ago. She was 89 and had been a big part of my life. While she had been married for a short while, she did not have any children and my brother and I became her family.

When she was admitted to St Vincent's Hospice in Darlinghurst, after several years in a nursing home, I flew from Port Macquarie to be with her. By the time I arrived, she had largely lost her voice but the sparkle was still very much in her eyes and the hint of a smile ever present.

Through my interest in arts and health, I have researched the area of palliative care and considered what 'end of life' might mean for people close to me and for myself. Yet I found it hard to be sitting by a hospital bed, holding the hand of someone special to me, who was dying. I gently stroked her arm, and talking about stories and experiences we had shared over the years. I told her how much I loved and admired her and what a wonderful life she had led. I smiled and joked, hummed her favourite tunes and told her not to be scared of dying. I asked her if she could hear me and she nodded. I became her voice and gave answers to her imagined questions.

My own children were regular visitors too in the last weeks of Pattie's life and you could see how much she enjoyed seeing her grand nieces and nephews and her great grand niece, who is just 5 months old. I marvelled at the way these young people embraced their role in helping Pattie on her way.

I recounted this experience to my friend Molly Carlile who manages a region for Palliative Care in Victoria. She made the simple and reassuring comment that it is important to have the confidence to say what you feel to people who are dying – and to allow them to have their story heard. Molly will be expanding on the sensitive subject of dealing with grief and loss at The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing international Arts and Health conference in Port Macquarie from 10 to 13 November 2009.

In palliative care, music therapy is often employed to assist in the management of anxiety and pain and as a distracting technique. I published a story several years ago concerning a woman with metastatic breast cancer, who, driven by an 'all-consuming' fear of death,

admitted herself into the Palliative Care ward at Melbourne's Calvary Healthcare, Bethlehem. On referral to the hospital's music therapist, the 48-year-old patient recounted her sleeplessness, night terrors and, with great distress, embarrassment over her two adult children seeing her panic attacks. While desperate to return home, she wanted to stay until her anguish became manageable and her dignity restored.

"I knew she favoured classical music, so I played it for her on the piano," recalled the music therapist. "As I played, her clenched fists relaxed, her body became less rigid, and her breathing slowed and evened. After 40 minutes, she opened her eyes. She smiled and told me this was the first time in six months she'd relaxed."

Together, the music therapist and the patient devised relaxation methods which used a recorded version of the therapist's playing and other music. Shortly afterwards the woman was discharged from Calvary and lived at home successfully for eight weeks, before being readmitted to hospital for terminal care.

This dramatic turnaround was one of twenty-five cases documented in a quantitative study on the effect of music therapy reducing anxiety for terminally ill patients (Anne Horne Thompson 2006). Fourteen men and eleven women, between the ages of 29 and 90, were recruited. The compelling results included "a statistically significant reduction" in anxiety, tiredness and drowsiness along with "improvements in a sense of wellbeing, appetite and a reduction in shortness of breath".

Musicians and music therapists will have the opportunity of further developing their skills in a healthcare context through an innovative 3 day training program that is being offered prior to the Arts and Health conference in Port Macquarie this November.

Presented by Dr Cheryl Dileo, Professor of Music Therapy and Director, Arts and Quality of Life Research Center, at Temple University, Philadelphia, the course is limited to 15 musicians and a module will also be offered for 15 visual artists.

For more information, visit www.artsandhealth.org email info@artsandhealth.org or telephone 0416 641 482.