Te Wai Bereavement Quilts

Bringing comfort and compassion to death in hospital settings

We do not think of hospitals as the ideal place for our friends or whānau or even for ourselves to die. And yet about one in  three people  will die in the busy acute hospital environment. How can we make that experience a bit more human and compassionate?

Last year, Wellington Quilters gifted four large quilts to Wellington Hospital as part of the Capital & Coast DHB Te Wai Bereavement Programme. These quilts are draped over the mortuary trolley which alerts staff that something hugely significant  has happened for a person and for whānau. The Te Wai Bereavement Programme is a way to offer respect and comfort when a patient dies.

A few years ago, CCDHBs Dr Sinéad Donnelly, Cheryl Goodyer and Angela Wilson of Whānau Care (who provide cultural and practical support for Māori patients and whanau), in collaboration with several wards, decided to do something about the distressing experience of the death of a loved one in hospital.

Dr Donnelly explained that the research they conducted among staff and families of patients lead them to their next step. “Families described the mortuary trolley that comes up to collect the body as a ‘meat van.’ We wanted to improve the experience of death in a hospital as much as we could so we thought about ways to change that graphic description.”

Former CCDHB ICU clinical leader, Dr Peter Hicks, died suddenly in 2018. After his death, his daughter, a quilter, linked Dr Donnelly and her team to Wellington Quilters. They offered to make a number of quilts for CCDHB that have since become a key part of the Te Wai Bereavement Programme.

“Hospitals are busy places and when someone dies it is a huge event for whānau,” Dr Donnelly says. “The quilt can offer comfort to whanau and the Te Wai symbol that’s placed on the door is a reminder to staff of our common humanity and the respect that the death of a person deserves in a hospital setting.”

A group of people holding a flag

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