

Dr. Donna Ward

It was a tragedy in the life of her son's friend that changed Dr. Donna Ward. His schoolmate's mother had cancer and the family was looking for help. Ward is a family physician. She, more than anyone else in the school community, should have been able to help the young family in crisis.



Ward, however, would soon discover that even with years of medical training and experience, she could do little to ease the dying woman's suffering. Moved by the 33-year-old woman's plight, Ward began researching ways to help her die with dignity.

It was the early 1980s and Ward shared many traits with the woman – both were about the same age and had three young children. Ward worked with a pharmacist and home care providers to piece together a network that helped the woman fulfill her wish to die in her own home.

Now, more than twenty years later, Ward is the medical director of Palliative Care at the Grand River Regional Cancer Centre. As a pain and symptom management physician, Ward works to make a person who is not expected to survive their illness more comfortable. Ward said once, "Palliative care is really about living.... It's especially important for these patients to learn skills that help them make the most of their lives". Ward has been at the bedside when some of her patients have died and she describes the moment as "sacred".

Ward is known for going above and beyond the call of duty in a community that is desperately short of palliative care physicians. "I think she's a great humanitarian", said a nurse who worked with Ward. "I think we are very blessed, very fortunate to have her."

Last year, Ward received an award from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario for patient dedication and clinical excellence. She was also honoured at the 19th annual Mayor's Dinner for her pioneering work in palliative care in the region.

A person who nominated her for the municipal honour wrote:

"While the accomplishments on her resume are impressive, much more impressive is her overwhelming dedication to her patients, their families and the health care system . . . I see and hear first hand from many families who have experienced Dr. Ward's care; how caring and sensitive she has been to the person who died and her counsel to the survivors. Her care is not only medical, but includes the whole person from a spiritual and holistic perspective."

Ward and her husband, Dr. Mel Cescon, were touched by cancer when their son Paul Cescon was diagnosed with Burkitt's lymphoma when he was just eight-years-old.

Cescon recovered and went on to become a passionate fundraiser for the Canadian Cancer Society as well as AIDS relief programs. In addition to her work with cancer patients, Ward has also done fundraising for AIDS, encouraging fellow physicians to donate a day of their pay for African relief.

While her hectic schedule has not permitted her to volunteer in Africa as she had once hoped, Dr. Ward believes there is much she can do at home; “. . . we can contribute by raising awareness and interest and funds locally . . . I think we have an ethical responsibility to help.”

Photo courtesy of Grand River Hospital.