



For immediate release

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Harbor Hospice and Harbor Palliative Care launch tele-health to help minimize their patients' exposure to COVID-19

April 2, 2020 – West Michigan – News of an unexpected gift to the Harbor Hospice Foundation means health care staff can now have live, interactive audio and video conversations with their hospice and palliative care patients without meeting with them in person, keeping both patients and medical personnel safer amid concerns about the rapidly spreading coronavirus (COVID – 19.) Patients are thrilled with the new option.

“They love it for sure!” says Dr. Gerald Harriman, DO, medical director for Harbor Hospice and Harbor Palliative Care, just days into trying it out. “Our first use of it was with patients who have cancer and are receiving palliative care from us. They love the convenience and safety of it, and they are happy to be able to stay in close touch with us without leaving their home.”

Earlier this week, the federal government temporarily removed restrictions on the use of tele-health with hospice patients receiving Medicare. Dr. Harriman welcomed the announcement and held his first “virtual” conversation with one of his hospice patients Tuesday afternoon.

“The software platform is easy to use, and it offers a safe, personal way for patients to have face-to-face conversations with us,” says Dr. Harriman. “We can continue our close relationships with our patients while minimizing exposure to COVID-19 for them and for our health care workers.”

Each patient uses their own electronic device – a smart phone, a tablet or laptop with a camera, and internet access. A link is sent to the patient, and a click on the link brings the patient and medical staff person face-to-face. The program, according to Dr. Harriman, is secure, private, and HIPAA compliant.

Harbor Hospice and Harbor Palliative Care, serving residents in several counties in West Michigan, planned to initiate a tele-health program in the next year. But the urgency brought on by COVID-19 and a contribution from the organization’s long-time champion, Sue Wierengo, made it possible to launch it now and plan for the expansion of its use.

Wierengo’s gift came from a donor advised fund at the Community Foundation for Muskegon County that she and her husband Andy opened in 1996. Their children learned about it when they became more involved with Sue’s care. Knowing her long-time commitment to Harbor Hospice -- she founded its predecessor Hospice of Muskegon County in 1982 -- they called the organization to ask what it needed.

While this program is a huge benefit to patients and healthcare workers now, Dr. Harriman says the organization will also use it to expand its hospice and palliative care into rural areas that would otherwise require long drive times for patients and medical staff.

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The remarkable timing of Wierengo's donation is no surprise to those closest to her.

"Our mother was a pioneer in founding hospice care in Muskegon County, so for her to be able to make a gift nearly forty years later that is pioneering a new technology for the organization's patients is pretty amazing!" say her children. "She is incredibly happy and proud."

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