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What happens when we die?

CHERYL CORNACCHIA, The Gazette

Published: Saturday, February 10 2007

in the months leading up to her death, Julie Winnefred Bertrand, the world's oldest woman, had started to withdraw from the world around her.

The 115-year-old Montrealer had taken to sleeping for long stretches, sometimes 48 hours at a time, and often dozed through family visits.

Once social and involved in activities at her Ahuntsic nursing home, she rarely left the confines of her sixth-floor room at Residence Berthiaume du Tremblay anymore.



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Nurse Maxine Lybert plays cards with patient Fawzia Bachat at the West Island Palliative Care Centre this week. Rose De Angelis, the centre's nursing director, says palliative care nurses are ideally positioned to collect intimate details that can help educate society about death.

JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE

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So on Jan. 13, when out of the blue she asked for a complete tour of her nursing home - something she had never before requested - the nurses were surprised.

She asked to visit the chapel where she had prayed, the bank and depanneur on the building's main floor, and the salon where until two years ago, she had her hair done unfailingly once a week.

With the help of a nurse and a wheelchair she did it all, taking time to pause at the main doors of the home she first entered 32 years ago.

Then, it was over and she returned to her room.

Five days later, on Jan. 18, she died peacefully in her sleep at dawn.

- - -

Death. It's the final page of life, but in a society where dying has been institutionalized, rarely is it ever discussed and, as a result, it remains shrouded in mystery.

However fleeting, Bertrand offered the rest of us a glimpse into what many of us will experience when we die.

"Near death awareness" is a term used by doctors, nurses and palliative care workers to describe a constellation of unusual behaviours observed at the end of life.

"We all know we are going to die ... one day," said Teresa Dellar, a Montreal social worker and director of the West Island Palliative Care Centre.

"This is different."

A woman so sick she had been unable to eat for weeks suddenly declares: "This will be my last meal." She requests bacon and eggs and eats them happily. She dies the following day.

A man agitated by his wife's approaching birthday decides to celebrate the occasion early. He orders her favourite flowers. They arrive the day he dies.

A woman demands a nurse call her husband at 3:20 a.m. to make sure he is okay. Despite the hour, the nurse relents. She finds the husband is in need of emergency medical care. The woman dies within 48 hours.

After spending three months at the palliative care centre, a man estranged from his parents decides it is time to call them. He picks up the phone and dials their number. He dies a few days later.

Near death awareness, Dellar said, is the often unconscious recognition that death is just days or hours away. It can be accompanied by a burst of energy that allows the dying to

carry out last wishes, to right wrongs and say goodbyes. Families, though, can be left confused, uncertain what to make of it all.

The term "nearing death awareness" was coined in 1992 by two U.S. hospice nurses, Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley. They were among the first medical professionals to identify a phenomenon that is now recognized worldwide.

After following hundreds of terminally ill patients, Callanan and Kelley documented the phenomenon, which is characterized by premonitions, visions, dreams and unusual physical findings, in a book.

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