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Nurse's Work in Hospice Will Be Recognized Today

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HAINES CITY | Terry Watkins has spent a lot of years working in the field of nursing, but the area she finally settled on was one that some might find too emotionally difficult to handle: Assisting families who have just learned that a loved one has a terminal illness.

"I'm often the first to meet patients and families before they are exposed to hospice," she said. "Then I set up any services for them. I set it all up and move them on their way. I'm the first person they meet and I coordinate things with the physicians."

For Watkins, the rewards of her job outweigh the challenges of dealing with patients who are still coping with the shock of a grim diagnosis.

"This area has been the most rewarding for me," she said. "I devote my time and energy to helping them at that moment."

The Imperial Polk Chapter of the Oncology Nursing Society just named Watkins its 2010 RN Nurse of Hope, an award that goes to a nurse who practices in Polk County and excels in the field of oncology nursing. Watkins will be honored at the National Cancer Survivor's Day celebration today at Lakeland Regional Cancer Center.

Watkins is humbled by the recognition.

"I am completely surprised but very grateful for the honor. That was quite an honor," she said.

Watkins, who lives in Winter Haven, has been a nurse for 32 years and has been with Good Shepherd Hospice since 2003. Good Shepherd is a community-based, nonprofit organization that supports more than 750 patients in Polk, Highlands and Hardee

counties who are facing life-limiting illnesses.

Watkins works out of Heart of Florida Regional Medical Center, serving patients and their families in the Haines City and Davenport areas.

"Primarily I'm assigned to Heart of Florida hospital, and I'm a hospital liaison," she said. "I meet with patients and families and I talk to them. Often they maybe have just gotten the news that they have a life-limiting illness and I have to talk to them about what that means, whether it's the disease process or if I need to call the oncology team."

If it sounds painful to meet with families at a time of such intense grief, Watkins noted that in many cases the families are very grateful for the help they're getting.

Watkins was working in Lake Wales when she found that she needed help from hospice after a member of her family got sick.

"At the time, my father became ill with a life-threatening illness," she said. Her father passed away, and so did her grandmother, and in both instances they benefited from the help they received from hospice care.

"I've known what it's like to be on both sides of the issue," she said, and that's what first attracted Watkins to hospice care.

A native of western Pennsylvania, Watkins practiced nursing in Indiana before moving to Florida in 1990. She would managed the Good Shepherd Hospice in Lakeland and Auburndale before taking the position at Heart of Florida.

"Of all the areas I've been in, hospice is my passion," she said.

"I will see patients time and time again. We like to get to know them before their discomfort escalates, so we can know what they need. A lot of my work is in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) to allow nature to take its course as well."



WATKINS