

THE SMILING WARD

By PETRA HALL

A visit to the hospice centre at Archet Hospital in Nice

Without the non-profit association Pallia Aide this institution would probably not exist in Nice. And without the selfless efforts of four admirable women and 40 equally admirable employees, this association, founded in 2006, would probably not exist either. A look behind the scenes of a hospital ward that everyone hopes never to have to enter.



Relieving suffering with heart and soul: the responsible doctor Flora Tremellat (front left), the president of Pallia Aide and psychologist Audrey Roman; governess Françoise Cathagne (back left) and project manager Nathalie Vilanova. © D.R.

Admittedly, I wasn't quite at ease with the idea of visiting the palliative department in the Archet hospital in Nice. I imagined horrible pictures of suffering patients in a gloomy ambience. Quite anxiously I walked down the hallway: flooded with light, pastel-coloured, pleasantly decorated, no cries of pain. Twelve single rooms are available to people who are helped to die with dignity or to make their lives bearable for as long as possible. The palliative ward is therefore not necessarily the last stop.

Four smiling and obviously competent women welcome me: the president of Pallia Aide and psychologist Audrey Roman, the head physician Flora Tremellat, the Gouvernante Françoise Cathagne and project manager Nathalie Vilanova. The atmosphere is

cheerful; there is a lot of laughter. Would it otherwise be possible to endure so much daily suffering?

In 2006 there was only one palliative medicine* department with six beds in Nice, specialising in the terminally ill. Today, thanks to Pallia Aide, there are twelve in Archet Hospital (six in Antibes, four in Monaco). Shockingly few, considering the long waiting lists! Without this association, the committed group would not have been entitled to financial support. And this is desperately needed. After the death of a loved one, many families ask for donations for Pallia Aide, in lieu of flowers. Without donations the all-important service for the suffering and their relatives - care that is not possible in normal hospital wards - would be impossible.

The mission of the committed women is to ease all aspects of the terminal illness in a warm, family environment. As well as possible, the patients shall at least temporarily push their pains and worries into the background, a beautifully landscaped garden, cultural and gastronomic variety and a therapeutic relaxation bathtub contribute to this.

The garden is adorned with an artistic mosaic on which a patient had worked for many months. Even when he was released home, he kept coming back. The staff is convinced: "This has prolonged his life". Responsible for a varied programme and the only one of her kind in France is a governess whose position was created in 2012. Every year she is financed by a generous donor whose father was cared for here until his death. Françoise Cathagne has been working in this position for seven years. She does not wear a white doctor's coat and cares for patients and relatives with enormous personal commitment: "My job is to shed some light on people's everyday lives; I am the ward's mom," says the trained medical secretary. She comes up with a lot of ideas to alleviate the suffering of her subjects: Every Wednesday there is a "café gour-



The garden of the palliative station was designed by a landscape gardener. © D.R.

mand", and on Fridays everyone has an apéritif with homemade pastries "so that it smells like home". Françoise organises small parties, celebrates Christmas and New Year's Eve with them and their families, and goes shopping with patients wherever possible. She brings musicians and artists into the house and has even celebrated two weddings here. And she takes the patients in her arms, without fear of contact, to give comfort. Fixed visiting hours are unheard of here, even small children are allowed to come.

Françoise does not hide the fact that her work is psychologically difficult, but speaks of vocation. Nevertheless, she will retire next year. A great loss for the department. Flora adds: "When I first visited this place, I was fascinated: "Here you take a lot of time for the patient, listen to him, respect his personality. And I knew right away: "That's why I wanted to become a doctor."

The team also passes on their warmth of heart, their knowledge and their commitment to nurses in other wards, hospitals and old people's homes. They are also used to support the bereaved.

The palliative department (hospice) in the Archet has about 330 patients per year, each of them staying on average for about 13 days. Some do not want to return to the normal hospital or home. It is not only elderly people who seek help here. The minimum age is 18 years and the facility is open to anyone in the French health system, regardless of nationality or religion. ▽

*According to the World Health Organization, palliative medicine is "the active, holistic treatment of patients with a very advanced disease and a limited life expectancy at a time when the disease no longer responds to curative treatment and the control of pain, other complaints, psychological, social and spiritual problems has the highest priority".

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