

I've been a physician for over forty years. In all that time, including medical school and residency training, I was never taught how to work with and support a patient who is at their (inevitable) end of life. We learned everything about how to keep people alive; we learned nothing about how to help people and their families through their end-of-life transition. I've seen doctors who should know better, like oncologists, who deal with death all the time, fumble discussions with patients about their futures because of the physician's discomfort with the topic. In addition, our culture provides little to no education or support for people and families on how to approach this milestone. Death, it seems, is the last taboo in both medicine and American culture and, as a result, most people find themselves completely at a loss when faced with a serious or terminal diagnosis. What do I do now? What's going to happen? What are my options? What should my family do? What "affairs do I need to get in order" and what does that even mean? How do I come to grips with this terrifying reality? What do I do about my existential dread and fear?

In the absence of other support systems, this becomes the domain of the Death Doula- a non-medical person specifically trained to assist and guide patients and families facing upcoming mortality and death. The Death Doula guides patients through a broad array of topics, ranging from:

- a) Administrative (e.g., advanced care directives, care plans, living wills, financial power of attorney, life insurance policies, etc.
- b) Procedural (e.g., scheduling appointments and care visits, organizing paperwork, helping with obituaries and eulogies, funeral planning, options for what to do with the body, etc.
- c) Assistance with Daily Living (e.g., run errands, do light housework, cook, support caregiver, help with overnight care, etc.)
- d) Spiritual support (e.g., assist with legacy projects, helping with existential dread and fear of death, helping patients derive meaning from their lives, providing ritual support, helping families deal with grief, etc.)

*Inspired Endings* Death Doula Training is a three-day workshop in beautiful North Kohala that covers this broad array of topics with compassion and deep experiential learning. Through a combination of presentations, small group discussions, hand-on art projects, and realistic simulations of certain processes of death and dying (such as sitting vigil and preparing a body for burial), the workshop brings participants into the realm of end-of-life. Death shifts from being taboo to being a subject worthy of intense study, discussion, and introspection. Each participant is invited to consider their own mortality and eventual death and to start their own thinking and planning through both pre-reading as well as group discussions. At the end of the three days, the participant will have a completely new relationship with death, both other peoples' as well as their own.

Bobbi Bryant has been working with death and dying for over 25 years, and she brings a wealth of practical experience as well as technical knowledge to the course. While Death Doula courses are available online, the small group dynamics, combined with the hands-on simulations, makes this course particularly impactful. I highly recommend this course to anyone who wants to learn how to help others through their end-of-life transition, as well as to people who want to become more knowledgeable and engaged in their own end-of-life planning. It is truly a life-changing experience.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Riff, MD

Dr. Riff is the former Medical Director for Kipuka O Ke Ola Native Hawaiian clinic. He is currently an internist at Kipuka O Ke Ola, and the founder and director of the Hawaii Heart Brain Center at North Hawaii Community Hospital from 2003 to 2008.