



See how staff and volunteers have pulled out all the stops to keep patients and their families connected with ellenor hospice and its services during the covid pandemic

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## **Ex-nurse helps carers and the bereaved through isolation of lockdown**

Seventy-four-year-old Sue Gray has spent her life looking after patients and their families – and the challenges of Covid have not deterred the retired nurse from reaching out to others.

Like many of our staff and volunteers, who have adapted and evolved to meet the needs of patients, she has been working alongside our Wellbeing team and has had to find new ways to communicate with people who are now more isolated than ever.

Sue, who lost her own husband to cancer 11 years ago, says: “Since lockdown I have been making about 14 calls every week, phoning people who would usually attend the bereavement group or the Carers Cuppa.”

This past year has been tough for asthma sufferer Sue, especially as both of her children are frontline NHS workers and she has had to shield from them throughout most of the pandemic.

She says: “It’s been worse for a lot of others. Some have become bereaved during this year and they are among the most isolated. Being in lockdown magnifies everything. It has been awful for everyone.

“I know my own mental health has suffered and I’m not normally an anxious person. A lot of people who haven’t suffered too badly in the past have found this last year has really affected their mental health and their confidence. Everyone’s life has changed.”

The charity provides care and support to patients with life-limiting illnesses and their families -- and hosts various support groups. Before lockdown Sue volunteered at the bereavement group on Thursday evenings at our Northfleet hospice and ran the Carers Cuppa on alternate Saturday mornings. She was also an Inpatient Ward volunteer healthcare assistant.

She says: “It’s what keeps me busy because I have given all my life and I want to carry on giving. My son used to ask why I didn’t stay at home more and maybe do some knitting. Well, I have had to do that over the last year or so -- and I haven’t enjoyed it at all!”

Sue joined **ellenor** as a volunteer about 10 years ago, a year after losing her husband Gerry.

She says: “I retired to look after him at home. Gerry didn’t want to be anywhere other than home -- because I was a nurse, he just wanted me to care for him. He was never admitted to the hospice, but we did use their support services.

“It’s very different nursing your own husband. I had a lot of background knowledge, but when it comes to dealing with your own loved ones it can be very frightening, but luckily, we were able to talk about it.

“Nobody’s reactions and experiences are the same, but I think what happened to me has helped me to relate to others. When Gerry died a huge void opened up in my life and I needed to fill it. There was no contest really – I just wanted to be part of **ellenor** after they had done so much to help us during his illness.

“I asked if I could become a volunteer and about a year after Gerry died, I started on the inpatient unit serving drinks and doing the washing up, that sort of thing. Later on, it was suggested I get more involved in the support groups and about four or five years ago I started running the Carers Cuppa on alternate Saturday mornings.”

The pandemic put a stop to group meetings, but staff and volunteers have pulled out all the stops to keep patients and their families connected with the hospice and its services. Members of the various support groups have also shown enterprise and initiative, setting up chat and video call groups and offering each other emotional support during lockdown.

Sue says: “I was so pleased that some of the carers have set up their own regular video call and they have invited me to join in, which was a real honour. It is lovely to be able to chat again with everyone. Also, members of the bereavement group now have their own WhatsApp group.

“It has been difficult for many of us to learn all these new skills. I’m not very IT literate and we have all had to learn how to do video calls. My son even gave me his old iPhone as he was fed up with me using my old phone and getting in a muddle. These new skills are not a bad thing to have anyway.”

A relaxation in Covid rules means the hospice has recently been able to hold group meetings of about 10 people who are bereaved, on the last Sunday of each month.

Sue says: “I recently came back into the hospice building for the first time in a year to volunteer at one of these get togethers. Meeting face to face means such a lot.

“I have had my Covid vaccination now and I know the infection rates are coming down. I think we are all feeling a bit more confident and looking forward to a few more restrictions being lifted and normal life slowly

returning.”

If you're interested in joining our friendly team of volunteers at ellenor, please visit <https://ellenor.org/volunteer>.

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We are **ellenor**, a charity funded by the generosity of our local community, offering the best care and support to families facing terminal illness in Kent. We are the **only** charity in the county that provides hospice care for people of all ages – babies, children and adults - and their families. This includes pain and symptom relief, end of life care, respite, bereavement support and emotional and spiritual care.

Our Children's Hospice Care, formerly known as chYps, is provided in the comfort of the family home and spans across North and West Kent and the London Borough of Bexley. Adults living in Gravesham, Dartford and Swanley, receive care in their place of choice, including their own homes, at our Hospice in Gravesend and in local care homes.

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