

# There Is Life After Hospice, and Even Golf in Florida for Some

By REED ABELSON

Published: February 10, 2007

The New York Times

Hospice does not have to mean an immediate death sentence — as the late humorist Art Buchwald demonstrated. Last year, much to his and others' amazement, he survived for five months in a hospice program before being well enough to leave in July. It was not until last month that he died of kidney failure.

As Mr. Buchwald said that he did, some people find that supportive hospice care may actually lengthen their lives, and that the doctors' predictions of imminent demise may simply be wrong.

Mitchell Zimble, for example, was discharged from the hospital into a hospice program last summer after his doctors concluded that he would die within a matter of weeks because of his liver cancer. He was not well enough to continue chemotherapy, and one of his doctors wanted to make sure he got the care he needed to be comfortable both in the hospital and later at home.

The doctor, Ira Byock, is a nationally recognized expert in palliative care, a specialty aimed at improving the quality of life for patients with serious illness.

Mr. Zimble — who is known as Mickey — enrolled in a hospice program near his home in rural Vermont. There he received a wide range of services like nursing care and physical therapy. With the physician at the hospice keeping a close eye on him, he began to get better. At one point, the doctor turned to him and said, "On paper you should be dead, but you look great," Mr. Zimble's wife, Sandy, recalled.

As soon as Mr. Zimble was strong enough to get chemotherapy, he was able to graduate from hospice. He turned 75 in September and felt well enough for the couple to go to Florida for the winter.

"He's out there walking and playing nine holes of golf," said Mrs. Zimble, who credits Dr. Byock for attending to her husband's needs well enough for him to recover. Dr. Byock "kept him so comfortable that he did not have death on his mind," she said.

Dr. Byock, who is the director of palliative medicine at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, N.H., says hospice should be viewed not as giving up all hope but about getting the care one needs. If the disease continues to progress, the patient is likely to die, he said. But patients may also be able to gain the weight and strength necessary to prolong their lives.

"We're trying to change that trajectory," said Dr. Byock. "We're not ready to give up."