My mother, Hester Anderson passed away on the morning of Friday the 31st of October 2014 of cancer. She was 84 years old.
She had an rare tumour removed from her adrenal gland in October 2013, from which she recovered exceedingly well. She continued to live on her & own & take care of herself with support from us, her children. In june 2014, after seeing her sister move into aged care, she decided that she, too, would like to be somewhere that could give her company & 24 hour support. So we put the wheels in motion & she applied to an aged care facility.

Something else started to happen around this time- the return of her aggressive cancer. It started as a bit of a sore back, not suspicious at her age, with arthritis & such being common. By August, nothing was helping & she had CT scans & MRI scans, which revealed that there was a mass in her spine. After a horrible week of increasing pain & debilitation, she was taken to RMH, where she was assessed by palliative care, given medication to relieve her pain & radiation therapy was arranged. The treatment would not cure, but shrink the tumour, easing her pain & keeping her mobile. We were linked up with City Mission palliative care.

As luck would have it, we received a call the day of her discharge to say that a place had been found for her at Gladswood Lodge- her first choice of accommodation to see out her days. That began a hectic fortnight of moving, attending radiotherapy & appointments. But she was happy.

The radiotherapy ended 30th September & she was doing well, but was worn out. Fatigue was the biggest side effect for her- all her pain medications had been ceased, apart form paracetamol & her anti inflammatories. About a fortnight after her treatment ceased, we received a call from Gladswood to say that her blood pressure had dropped & the her breathing was concerning them. They had called a locum, who wanted to know what we would like done. I asked them to send her to RMH for assessment, as she had been doing so well.

In the ER, I explained that she was Not for Resus, but would like them to give her fluids & see how she went. She was assessed by oncology, who ordered scans that found she had multiple clots in her lungs- pulmonary emboli- and she was admitted for a few days to rehydrate & try to bust up some of the clots.

She returned to Gladswood on 21st of October & so began her quick demise. On Tuesday the 28th, i got a call from my sister who was visiting mum. She was distressed about mum's condition, so I left work & headed over. It was the most panicked, frantic 10 minute drive I have ever had.

When I arrived, she was in bed, rousable, but so exhausted. She was on oxygen continuously now. She told me that she was ready to go & we talked about that for a bit. Then I asked the staff to call palliative care, as i wanted her to be assessed & for them to be aware that we would probably need them more often.

The next 4 days were horrendous, to say the least. By that evening, she was delirious, agitated & distressed. A locum came to see her, supposedly to sign off on what the palliative care team had planned. Instead, i got a lecture about euthanasia. By this time, mum was unconscious & remained so until she died.

For the next 4 days, we watched mum pant like a dog, her breathed so laboured & exhausting, the morphine & midazolam infusion clearly not adequate to ease her distress. We never left her room, providing all her care- washing her, turning her, mouth care as the panting dried her mouth.

I expected far better care & empathy for her from the palliative care. We cared for my dad at home, with the support of RDNS, 22 years ago. I was nursing at Peter MacCallum at the time, so it was not as if i didn't know what was available for these patients. You would think this many years on, things would be so much better.

My mum’s life was prolonged for no good reason. She was not going to get better. She was dying. And she died with no dignity. I have gone over that week so many times, what i should have done, been more forceful with that stupid locum, why i didn’t notice thinks earlier. It was not the way i promised her that she would die. I told her i would make sure it was peaceful & calm. It was none of these things.

How can you, as human beings, as the peoples representatives, be so blind to the needs of someone who is dying? How could you think that prolonging the life of someone in that state is a good thing? You are foolish if you think that this is not being talked about in hospitals, homes, cafes & anywhere else people & families gather. Surely there comes a time in a dying person’s life when the kindest thing is to end the suffering? Having gone through this with both my parents, i would not wish it upon you. But perhaps until it does, you will never truly understand just what you are objecting to.

With Regards,
Margaret Anderson