

Jaya Vijayan, MD, Joins Holy Cross Hospital as Full-Time Palliative Care Physician

Improving the Quality of Life for Your Seriously Ill Patients

Jaya Vijayan, MD, joined the Holy Cross Hospital staff in August as the new full-time palliative care physician.

“It’s great to be part of an organization that emphasizes quality and compassion,” Dr. Vijayan says.

Dr. Vijayan provides consultative palliative and hospice services at the hospital, working together with the spiritual care and social work teams. She is consulted by hospitalists, intensivists, oncologists and other physicians who want to discuss how to best care for and what next steps to take for people with any serious, life-limiting illness. Dr. Vijayan helps other physicians figure out how to manage and relieve pain and other symptoms at any stage of the patient’s care. This might be uncontrolled pain, nausea or vomiting, for example, or a wide range of other symptoms.

“My goal is to improve the quality of life for seriously ill patients,” she explains, adding “It’s very rewarding to be able to make that difference.”

After graduating from medical school at the University of Kerala in India, she relocated to the United States and became a family practice resident at Howard University Hospital, beginning in 2000. Afterward, she gained medical licenses in Maryland, the District of Columbia and Virginia, and attained board certification in Family Medicine in 2003. For nearly a decade she practiced family medicine, including serving as the medical director of the Family Health Center at Howard University and being on the faculty of Howard University College of Medicine.

She decided to pursue a fellowship in palliative medicine in 2011 after seeing many patients at the end stages of cancer.

“I thought we could do better in symptom management and providing quality end-of-life care,” she says.

Palliative care is a relatively new medical field, with the first hospital-based

palliative care programs appearing in very few U.S. hospitals in the late 1980s. Dr. Vijayan explains that despite some common misconceptions, this field is different from hospice care.

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— *Jaya Vijayan, MD*
Palliative Care

“Hospice is primarily aimed at the last six months of life, but palliative care can take place at any time when a person has a serious or life-threatening illness,” she says. “Often times palliative care is not consulted until in the later stages of life, but that’s not as helpful to the patient as when we are consulted early on.”

Recent studies have shown that patients who have their symptoms controlled and are able to communicate their emotional needs have a better experience with their medical care. Their quality of life and physical symptoms improve. Palliative care consultations help determine patients’ treatment priorities and therefore help avoid unnecessary tests and procedures.

A palliative care doctor is never the patient’s admitting physician here at Holy Cross Hospital, Dr. Vijayan notes. Rather, the palliative care specialist comes in at the request of other doctors at the hospital and serves as a consultant to them. The palliative care consultation also may be prompted by the patient’s family or by a nurse’s request to the primary physician, if they think it would be helpful. In any of those cases, the palliative care physician coordinates care in the hospital with the physician(s) who are caring for the patient or with their primary care physician.



“As a palliative care doctor, I help patients and families understand the big picture,” she says.

When not at the hospital, Dr. Vijayan is very busy raising her three children, whose ages range from elementary school to high school. She also enjoys gardening. Moreover, she has recently written several book chapters on palliative medicine.

In fiscal 2012, the Holy Cross Hospital Palliative Care program cared for more than 400 seriously ill patients.

The best way to contact Dr. Vijayan is by requesting a consult in PowerChart or by calling Debbie Parsley, RN, CHPN, nurse coordinator for Palliative Care, at 301-754-7910 or Pamela Griffith-Smith, administrative assistant, at 301-754-7253.