

Q: Does Massachusetts provide decent care for those who are dying?

A: Not according to a recent report released by a group called "Last Acts". This group issued a "report card" on dying in America, which ranked each state in twelve elements of end-of-life care. The report suggests that most states provide mediocre end-of-life care. In 7 areas out of 12, the Commonwealth received a "D" for care of the dying.

In Massachusetts, less than 30% of deaths occur at home, giving the state a "D" ranking in this category. 70% of all Americans say they would prefer to die at home. Nationally, about 50% of all deaths occur in hospitals, yet more than 40% of the hospitals in the U.S. have no special end-of-life services, and 58% have no pain management programs. Roughly three out of four people over the age of 65 in Massachusetts did not use hospice care in their last year of life, giving the state a "D" ranking.

The study found that nationally at least one out of four people in a nursing home experienced pain for at least two months without appropriate pain management. Massachusetts scored a "C" for the number of nursing home patients that were in persistent pain. The Baystate scored a "D" for the state's level of support for end-of-life care. Only 2 primary care doctors in Massachusetts for every 10,000 people are certified in end-of-life care, giving the state a "D" ranking in this category. The score for nurses trained in end-of-life care was slightly better-a "C". The Commonwealth got one of its higher grades, a "B", in the quality of its state "advance directive" law, such as a living will or medical power of attorney.

The same report card study surveyed 1,000 Americans on the subject of care for the dying, and found that 93% of those surveyed said it was either "very important" or "somewhat important" to improve how the health care system cares for the dying. People felt the health care system was doing an "only fair" job in involving families in decision making about end-of-life care; making sure that dying people are as comfortable and pain-free as possible; and providing emotional support to dying people and their families. Three out of four people said the health care system is doing "only fair to poor" in making sure family savings are not wiped out by end-of-life care.

Q: What can I do to improve end-of-life care?

A: In Massachusetts there are at least 6 coalitions that have formed to improve end-of-life care in their communities. These coalitions advocate for more and better hospice care, encourage employers to improve their family-friendly policies, and offer bereavement support groups. To find the end-of-life care coalition nearest to you, call 1-800-Age-Info and press "3" for your Age Info Center, or go to <http://www.rallyingpoints.org>.