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A perspective on your health

by [Michelle Swartz](#), last modified May 10, 2008 1:19AM



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- Evening News photo by KIM BRENT Sister Patricia Rourke recently retired from her position at the Human Potential Center, but her work as a clinical psychologist helping individuals and families cope with grief, terminal illness and stress disorders continues at the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Motherhouse in Monroe. While making her morning rounds Thursday, Sister Patricia gets a hug and greeting from Sister Margaret Sullivan, a resident in the IHM's assisted living quarters. Sister Margaret was Sister Patricia's eighth-grade teacher when she was a girl.

Statistics provides a snapshot of health in Monroe County, but Sister Patricia Rourke has seen it first-hand.

Sister Rourke, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Ph.D., recently retired from her position as a licensed clinical psychologist with the Human Potential Center. She specialized in life-threatening illnesses and grief.

"I was there for the patient and their family. Everyone is different when dealing with the end of life. I talked to some families up until a patient's death, and others for weeks or months afterward," she said.

She has worked a total of 27 years as a psychologist.

During that time she has dealt with hundreds of families and she has come to three major conclusions about life-threatening illnesses.

"I believe lifestyle is a major factor," she said about illness and death in the county. "Smoking, using alcohol and drugs, and poor diet and nutrition are all reasons."

Sister Rourke said she believes another factor also contributes to the health of Monroe County.

"Poverty is a big factor because there's no intervention. They can't afford doctor visits and treatments that could otherwise keep them from getting sick," she explained.

Genetics, she said, is another reason for contracting diseases. "Some cancers are tied to heredity. Breast cancer is a big one. Heart disease as well," she said.

Sister Rourke first worked as a psychologist on staff at Providence Hospital for three years, then moved her practice to Monroe. Prior, she taught at several schools, including St. Mary Parish School.

She received a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Detroit, and her master's degree from the University of Detroit. She earned a doctorate in psychology from the Saybrook Institute in San Francisco.

Her work focused on helping people confront life-threatening illnesses. She also worked with families of terminally ill patients, oncology patients and patients with grief and post-traumatic stress disorder. She also worked closely with Mercy Memorial Hospice of Monroe. "I mostly had cancer patients," she said. "But the bright side of that is a lot more people are surviving cancer today."

While she faced death with many elderly patients, Sister Rourke also helped many terminally ill children.

"People would be surprised by the number of kids with chronic diseases in Monroe," said the 64-year-old.

She helped children with various illnesses, such as muscular dystrophy and birth defects, and serious injuries caused by accidents. She also noted high rates of obesity and diabetes in children.

Sister Rourke has helped many families grieving the death of a child.

"Some saw (death) as a blessing," she said. "Others asked why."

Being an IHM nun, Sister Rourke always has had to be careful when talking to families about death and life after death.

"You have to walk an intuitive line," she said. "I respected their beliefs. I had to go in their world and not bring them into mine."

She also is a believer in genetics being a major cause of life-threatening diseases since her parents and sister all died from cancer. Sister Rourke and her other sisters, however, have not been diagnosed with the disease.

"They died years ago, when treatment was brutal and minimal. You can detect it earlier today than they could back then," she said.

Now retired, Sister Rourke continues to help others. She serves at the IHM on several committees, including the ethics committee. She has been in the IHM for 46 years.

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