

*An Excerpt from a NZ Herald Article  
By Lee Umbers 17 Jun, 2018*

## **Death Doulas: Providing comfort for those nearing the end of their lives**

Lee Umbers meets those whose work is to help the dying spend their last days as well as possible.

When Elizabeth Taylor, 91, needed help to stay in her home, son Peter set about ensuring the best caregiver. While he and his brothers concentrated on guaranteeing the physical welfare of their mother who had health issues, his sister-in-law Gail also wanted Elizabeth helped with the "end-of-life process", including its spiritual aspect. "We moved our mindset from feeding mum and taking care of mum to helping mum through that journey," Taylor says. That's when the family turned to Carol Wales who is an end-of-life doula – part of a rising movement promoting greater compassion and companionship for people nearing death.



End-of-life doulas, also known as death doulas, empower those in the final stages of their lives and their families. They help create death plans, provide spiritual and psychological support, listen to and advocate for them. The word doula derives from an ancient Greek word for a woman of service, but both genders perform the role. Wales, who Gail knew of, supported Elizabeth for around a year before she died, including moving into her home where she was both caregiver and doula. "We had a lovely relationship," Wales says. "She just kept saying she loved me".

Peter Taylor says Wales took great care of his mother and her role as a doula was invaluable for Elizabeth and the family. "She [Wales] just opened my eyes to the fact this was a process as natural as childbirth, "it's going to happen, so let's make this special. It took me a few weeks to process it. That the death process or journey was something that maybe should be embraced."

Taylor says his mother was able to have conversations with Wales and Gail "that she couldn't have with her boys". "I think she probably just thought that she'd freak us out."

"Carol being there and being able to pick up on those times where mum needed comfort or guidance was just so important to the quality of mum's last year."

Wales, also a celebrant, conducted Elizabeth's funeral. Taylor says it was precious hearing her "talk about her friend Elizabeth".

"Carol holds a special place in our hearts."

Taylor had not heard of an end-of-life doula before Wales. He would recommend that support, "it certainly brightened up mum's life."

Wales says the motivation for her to become an end-of-life doula came from supporting her mother through 12 years of care including rest homes before her death in 2012.

"I saw people die on their own. I wanted them to know there was someone there with them. It's such a comfort [to them] - just sitting there holding someone's hand or just talking to them gently."

Wales has been present at the moment of death of a number of those she has supported and seen how "in that last moment" or just before, they "have suddenly gotten calm". She says she has never been afraid of death. Her first experience of it was with her family cat, who she fetched water for and stayed with as he neared his end. "I just knew that I wanted to acknowledge his life. I was only about 7 at the time. It was really important to me."

After her mother's death, Wales, who has volunteered at hospices, completed an online end-of-life education course and began doula work. People she has been a doula to have told her how much they appreciated her being there. One called Wales "her angel". She has become and stayed friends with family

members. A woman who died of cancer asked that she be a caring female figure for her daughter after she passed. Wales has supported people of different ethnicities and faiths including Catholic, Buddhist and no religious belief.

Uncertainty about what lay after death was common. Even if people hadn't had a religious upbringing "we've always heard about sin and hell".

"Those things sit with us. It's a conversation that comes up with a fear around that."

One woman "had lived a life that didn't have too many issues". But "the questions still came up around where am I going and would there be any penalties [for] some of the things she'd done".

The woman told her their frequent conversations about that had allayed her concerns, Wales says.

The end-of-life process can also be a time of relationship resolution. "I call them the bridges of forgiveness."

She has acted as an intermediary between the person and their family, giving them space from each other when necessary and "bringing them together, and helping that person release".

"It's like sometimes that builds and it's sitting on their chest, just wanting something to be said, and once that's happened, then they feel ready.

"It's so lovely to see people resolve that before they go."