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Pope's Lenten Message Reinforces Need for Improved Care at Life's End, Duke Expert Says

Last week, in a special Lenten message, Pope John Paul II called upon Catholics worldwide to strengthen approaches to caring for the elderly. “The care of the elderly, above all when they pass through difficult moments, must be of great concern to all the faithful,” the pope said.

Dr. Richard Payne, a physician and director of Duke University's Institute on Care at the End of Life, calls the statement a welcome endorsement for expansion of palliative care for the elderly, frail and disabled.

“Patient and family requests for assistance in dying is often borne out of fatigue and frustration,” Payne said. “Our responsibility is to care and promote physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of patients and families so that these requests are rare.”

If current demographic predictions are accurate, more than 800,000 Americans will be 100 years old or older by 2050. This raises many questions about how our communities, our congregations and our health care system should be revised to meet the needs of our aging society, according to Payne.

The 84-year-old pope was hospitalized himself earlier this week with breathing difficulties linked to a bout with the flu. The Vatican has reported that he is improving.