In the six years since she became medical director at Duke HomeCare & Hospice, Dr. Toni Cutson, MD, MHS, has seen the need for hospice care increase and the care become more complex. “We’ve always addressed patient needs, but we’re seeing more special needs,” she says. “Over half our patients have lung, liver, kidney, and heart issues instead of cancer. Everything is palliative, and there are many layers of complexity to caring for these patients.”

Cutson manages these ever-evolving needs by using a hands-on approach to hospice and treating patients as if they were family. “I always think, ‘If this was my mother or husband, my sister or son, how would I want them to be treated.’ That’s my guiding philosophy.”

Cutson describes her path to hospice care as one of natural evolution. She practiced family and geriatric medicine early in her career and relies on that experience today. “Many of our patients are older with more than one health issue,” she says. “With hospice I often address acute symptom management. My background helps me stay tuned in to their other health needs.”

Every day, Cutson sees hospice offer patients relief from their symptoms. Hospice also helps families interpret what is happening as a loved one approaches the end of life, and offers bereavement services for a full year after he or she passes away. For referring doctors, hospice is an invaluable information conduit. “Patients want their doctors to be kept informed about their care,” Cutson says. “And the doctors depend on us to be their eyes and ears in the home.”

Cutson takes this role seriously. While she counts on hospice nurses for day-to-day patient information, she is known for visiting her patients in person. “Nothing replaces seeing patients for yourself. When I can meet them and their families, and see how they are functioning at home, I can make the recommendations that are most helpful.”

The role of the hospice medical director is integral to the interdisciplinary team. Dr. Cutson as the DHCH medical director oversees the care provided by the hospice team: nurses, social workers, chaplains, bereavement counselors, certified nursing assistants, and volunteers, coordinates the plan of care with the attending physician and is available for consultation. She is also a teacher who mentors medical students and new physicians to help them understand what hospice is and the benefits for their patients.

Dr Cutson was recently elected to the board of directors of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization as palliative care director. She joins the board in January for a three-year term directing the national agenda. Her special kind of caring makes her a role model for all those who work with her.