

## November becomes awareness month times three

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November in Riverton is not what it used to be.

The month is now designated as pulmonary hypertension awareness month, national hospice month and national home care month as a result of three separate proclamations at the Riverton city council's regular meeting on Tuesday, Nov. 4.

### Pulmonary hypertension

Former city council member Cricket Mitchell stood to speak in support of pulmonary hypertension awareness. She held in her hands a boxlike machine called an infusion pump she carries with her everywhere she goes. The pump continuously administers medication to her heart through an indwelling catheter.

"I'm sure I look like a familiar face to you," Mitchell said. "Very few of you know I have a disease called primary pulmonary hypertension."

Mitchell was diagnosed with the uncommon, untreatable disease in December 1997. This summer, she joined Nancy Stearns, who has the treatable secondary pulmonary hypertension, to start a twice-yearly support group for Wyoming residents diagnosed with the disease.

"We found five patients in Fremont County alone and 20 in Wyoming," Mitchell said. "There are patients out there."

Mitchell gave the council some information about the disease, which causes continuous high blood pressure in the pulmonary artery in the lungs. The high pressure can enlarge the heart, possibly causing it to lose the ability to pump, she said.

Pulmonary hypertension can affect people of all ages and ethnicities, though some are more prone to developing the disease.

"It's often not recognized until it is quite advanced," Mitchell said. "The early symptoms can often be attributed to those of many other conditions."

Many patients who have pulmonary hypertension are misdiagnosed with illnesses like asthma or bronchitis, which share similar symptoms. Symptoms include chest pain, lowered energy, swollen ankles and legs, breathlessness, dizziness and blue lips and skin.

"When the doctor told me what I had for sure, he told me unfortunately there is no cure for this and you can die from it," Mitchell said. "I was in tears."

Mitchell's doctor told her that the more she learns about the disease, the better her chances would be to survive. By using medication, maintaining a low sodium diet and limiting her activities to ensure her

heart rate does not rise too high, Mitchell has now lived with pulmonary hypertension for 11 years.

Recent data has indicated the length of survival for patients with pulmonary hypertension is continuing to improve, with some able to manage the disease for 15 to 20 years or longer.

"With more research there can be better life expectancy," she said. "It's not difficult to believe there is a cure that can be found for this. ... I'm surprised I'm still around, but I refuse to give up."

For more information about the disease or the support group, call Mitchell at 856-7783.

### Hospice

November is also national hospice month and was recognized by the city council as well. Hospice providers assist in hospitals, nursing homes and private residences to help patients who often have a short life expectancy. They offer pain management, therapy, nutrition and other supportive care to make it easier for family and friends to spend time together during their loved ones' final days. Hospice experts also offer grief counseling to friends and family members after their loss.

Mayor John Vincent said he supports hospice care, as he believes those near death should be able to spend their last hours in a natural state.

"We kind of isolate ourselves from death now," Vincent said. "I

remember when people had the benefit of dying at a home situation and didn't have to be hooked up to stuff they maybe didn't want to be hooked up to."

### Home care

Home care, which shares many attributes with hospice care, is also celebrated nationally in November. Home care is a growing alternative to hospitalization or other institution-based forms of health care for acute, chronic and terminal illnesses. Each year, home care providers deliver health care to the doorstep of millions of elderly, disabled and chronically ill Americans who prefer to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible.

Vincent said his mother was very involved in home health care at the end of her life, and home care providers who were present at the council meeting said they remembered Vincent's mother as a very active member of the home health care community.

"When she was staying at home she got assistance in her home," Vincent said.



Vincent