

## **Improving End-of-Life Care for Nursing Home Residents with Dementia**

**Ruth Palan Lopez, PhD, GNP-BC**  
**University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing**  
**MGH Institute of Health Professions School of Nursing**

Many people with dementia die in nursing homes with untreated pain and insufficient palliation. Ruth Palan Lopez believes that nursing homes can be a place of comfort and compassion for those who die with dementia, and she has dedicated her career to achieving this goal.

As a gerontological nurse practitioner, Palan Lopez provided primary and acute care to nursing home residents. “One afternoon, a patient asked me to sit beside her and gently held my face in her hands,” Dr. Palan Lopez recalls. “She looked me in the eyes and said ‘Ruth, I have lived a long time. I am 101 years old. I have had enough. Please, give me something to end my life now before things get worse.’ Dr. Palan Lopez explained that while she could not influence the length of life, she would do everything she could to ensure that she had comfort and quality to her remaining days. Shortly thereafter, the patient had a stroke, fell out of her nursing home bed, sustained a fracture, and developed pressure ulcers. Despite Dr. Palan Lopez’s best efforts to ensure her comfort, the resident died after much suffering. This defining experience led to Dr. Palan Lopez’s research career. She now studies end-of-life care in nursing homes. Her goal is to find ways to improve end-of-life care for nursing home residents, especially those with cognitive impairment who cannot advocate for themselves.

Palan Lopez credits the John A. Hartford Foundation and BAGNC’s Claire M. Fagin Postdoctoral Fellowship with advancing her scholarly work. At the NYU Summer Research Institute, Dr. Palan Lopez met Dr. Neville Strumpf, and together with Dr. Susan Mitchell, provided mentorship that enabled Dr. Palan Lopez to conduct a significant study of feeding tube use among nursing home residents with advanced cognitive impairment and to disseminate her research findings in prestigious journals and at national conferences. According to Dr. Palan Lopez, “The fellowship not only provided financial resources, but welcomed me into a supportive family of passionate gerontological researchers.”

Dr. Palan Lopez is Assistant Professor at MGH Institute of Health Professions School of Nursing in Boston. She was a John A. Hartford Claire M. Fagin Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity Fellow from 2007-2009.

10/2009