



“His mere presence at the bedside is an almost absolute indicator of impending death”

—DR. DAVID DOSA

“He loves ice water,” says nurse Mary Miranda. “Like most cats, he likes to sleep in the sun.”



# CAN THIS CAT SMELL DEATH?

When Oscar cuddles next to a patient at a Rhode Island nursing home, doctors say it's a comforting sign the end is near

Marion McCullough had been in a coma for a week when Oscar, the regal-looking cat who shares quarters with patients at the Steere House Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Providence, leapt onto her bed, nuzzled her and purred contentedly. More than two hours later, Marion passed away at the age of 84. Did Oscar know something? Maybe so, reports the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Since McCullough's death in November 2005, Oscar has shown the same consideration for 24 other patients in the 41-bed dementia unit. Each time, the 2-year-old cat would jump onto a patient's bed and purr. Each time, the patient would die within hours. “He hasn't missed one,” says nurse Mary Miranda. “It just became uncanny.”

“What's truly fascinating is that he really is such a non-social cat,” says Dr.

David Dosa, who wrote the *Journal* article. “He really wants to be left alone. In the piece, I talk about him giving this sort of hiss when a patient comes by.” Dosa says he has received reports of similar behaviors in cats and dogs around the world. He believes—as does Dr. Joan Teno, a staff physician at Steere House who considers the cat “part of the culture here”—Oscar's sense of smell may have something to do with his

actions, but he also says the cat may be mimicking the nursing home's caregivers, who look after the dying with a ritual that includes low lights, soft music and aromatherapy.

Oscar has not replaced nursing assessments, but staff members so respect his predictive abilities that they call to prepare family members when he shows signs of affection toward a patient. Some family members say they appreciate Oscar's special attention. Jack McCullough believes that his mother, Marion, would have been happy to know that Oscar was with her at the end. “Oscar's comforting purr was a welcome addition to the already peaceful scene.”

By Paysha Stockton Rhone in Providence