

Face the Storm Before it Happens



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Imagine not being able to speak for yourself in a health care emergency. Who would you choose to speak for you? **Advance care planning is a process of thinking about your values, beliefs and wishes for your future health and personal care, and, sharing them with the people you trust. It can include choosing who would make care decisions for you if you cannot.**

Dr. Joseph Westgeest, MD, a physician specializing in palliative care in Vancouver, BC, says that **now** is the time to have a conversation with someone you trust to speak for you – because it will only get harder as time goes by. When people are fixed in their mindset, they could end up with medical interventions they would never have wanted.

According to Dr. Westgeest, medical professionals can be quite comfortable putting these medical supports in place. He treats many people who have avoided advance care planning (ACP) their entire lives, including one woman who is now in her 80's.

“She said she has never attended a funeral because the thought of death scares her,” Dr. Westgeest says. “As physicians, we also need to be empathetic to people’s habits and ideas they have internalized over time. I see an epidemic of loneliness in the elderly population, which can add to ACP challenges. It is useful to have surrounding community to help us walk through these conversations.”

While many find it difficult to reach out to their support systems and ask for help in planning their future, the irony is that in doing so, they can preserve their independence. Further, having a plan in place can improve quality of care and patient outcomes.

“In my home visits, I may need to ask my patients ‘Do you want to die in the back of an ambulance? How would you feel if a catastrophic medical event happened in your home? Would you want your child to see that?’” says Dr. Westgeest. “These are very difficult questions to have to answer. Procrastination takes easy things and makes them harder and takes hard things and makes them impossible.”

After all, the worst time to come up with a plan is when there is an emergency. Advance care planning is a process of reflection and communication that respects an individual’s autonomy and helps ensure their values and wishes guide medical decision-making, even if an individual is unable to participate due to illness or incapacity.

Have you shared your wishes with you loved ones?