

Let's start the discussion about Death and Dying- Advanced Care Planning

Often the topic of death and dying is seen as negative or sad and talking about it is avoided. Recent polls have revealed that fewer than 50% of Canadians have talked with their loved ones about end-of-life and nearly 40% are actually "creeped out" by the conversation. While many of us plan for important life events such as education, getting married, having a family, many of us don't talk about our wishes regarding death and dying. The best time to discuss your wishes is when you are well, before you are ill or unable to speak for yourself. Advanced Care Planning is a way to tell others about your future health care wishes. It is also a way to name the person who will make medical decisions for you if you are unable. This person is called a Substitute Decision Maker and can help make sure your wishes for health care decisions, including medical treatments, are respected. When you are deciding who will be your Substitute Decision Maker these are questions you may want to consider: Who do you want to make decisions for you? Do they know your wishes and what to say on your behalf if you are unable to do so?

Your decisions about your future care, including who will be your Substitute Decision Maker can then be recorded in an Advanced Health Care Directive. These Directives only come into effect if you are unable to speak for yourself. Under the laws of Newfoundland & Labrador your Substitute Decision Maker will make health care decisions based on what they believe you would want; not on their own beliefs. If you do not have a Directive and would like to learn more, speak with your physician, nurse, social worker, hospital chaplain or contact the Provincial Government or a local Western Health office in your area.

One of the decisions about care that you should consider is whether or not you wish to die at home. Western Health provides End-of-Life services for those who wish to stay at home for as long as possible, or to die at home. These services are provided in the last weeks of life when other treatments have been stopped. They are given free of charge and may include home support, medical supplies, equipment and/or medications. However, if you wish to be cared for during the last days-to-weeks of life within a health care facility, Western Health also offers designated palliative care beds throughout Western Newfoundland.

Advanced Care Planning can help make sure your wishes for treatment are respected. Research has shown that Advanced Care Planning lowers stress, depression and anxiety for your family because they know your wishes and can act on your behalf. Talk it over with your family members, health care provider and Substitute Decision Maker so they can have a good understanding about what you value, as well as your preferences about your care at the end-of-life. These conversations can help you create a plan for the future, when you can't make decisions for yourself.

April 16 is recognized as National Advanced Care Planning Day, a day to start these important conversations with your Substitute Decision Maker, family and friends. It is also a day when you could review any plans you have already made. The Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association's national "Speak Up" website has a number of resources, including workbooks, videos, wallet cards, and conversation starters, as well as resources and information about legal requirements for each province and territory. It's time to stop making excuses – and start talking.

For more information, contact your nearest Western Health Community Support office or search "community support" on Western Health's website (www.westernhealth.nl.ca).

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