

Who knows my end-of-life wishes?

We are all on the same trajectory from birth to death, although our paths differ greatly. And yet, curiously, so many of us live from day to day, decade to decade, without giving much, if any thought, to considering how we would want to be cared for in situations where we are no longer able to make decisions for ourselves, or to think about how we want our lives to end. A few months ago the Angus Reid Forum published an on-line survey from Willful, that found 57% of Canadians don't know the end-of-life wishes for ANY of their loved ones, and 66% of Canadians don't know the end-of-life wishes for their spouse! And, sadly, only 5% of adult children have knowledge about their family's end-of-life issues. These are sobering, sad statistics.

Some fortunate individuals are able to make it through almost their entire lives without a health crisis or traumatic accident that would necessitate decisions about treatment choices and interventions. However, although tenacious, life is unpredictable. None of us knows what might befall us at any point – an unexpected cancer or degenerative neuro-cognitive diagnosis, a major car accident, for example. We owe it to ourselves and to our loved ones to “pre-think” about some of the health possibilities that we might find on our life's journey. If I have that serious car accident and am in a coma, have I made my wishes clear to my loved ones and health care providers in an Advance Directive? Have I assigned a Power of Attorney for Personal Care/Substitute Decision Maker who knows my wishes?

Of course, our values and wishes may change and evolve as we age, or as our health status changes. Conversations with our SDM about our wishes are key to ensuring that we can maintain as much autonomy and control over our lives as possible, especially if there comes a time when we are unable to express our own wishes. And the better informed our loved ones are about our values and beliefs, the less chance there is that there will be “family squabbles” at a time when we are in a health crisis. What a gift to give our loved ones. Dying With Dignity Canada and other organizations offer free workshops in Advance Care Planning and DWDC has an ACP kit on its website.

As we approach end-of-life whether by aging or by other deterioration of our health, we begin to think about the options and choices we may have before us (unless we are denying that death is inevitable). Most of us will want palliative care to manage pain, assist our loved ones, and ease our transition so that we may have a good death if we are struggling with a life-threatening condition. Unfortunately, across Canada, there are many places where access to palliative care is very limited. Stopping eating and drinking is a choice that some people make when they want their lives to end within a week or two. And we are so very fortunate in Canada that we have medical-assistance-in-dying (MAID) as an option if we meet the eligibility criteria. About 2% of deaths in Canada are a result of MAID. Some individuals, whose suffering is unbearable, may not want to let a natural death occur, even with support from palliative care (although more than 80% of those who choose a MAID death have been in receipt of palliative care). The stories of those who followed a MAID path tell of relief, satisfaction, love, peace, and a death with dignity. Awareness of the possible option of a MAID death is still not broad enough, even though it has been legal since 2016. If you belong to a group that would be interested in learning more, contact us at Ottawa.outreach@dyingwithdignity.ca.

As the population ages, a growing number of us have a responsibility to consider the latter part of our lives, to think about our values, what our wishes would be, and to share these with our loved ones. As a participant in one of our workshops said “talking about dying won’t kill you”.

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