The D-Word: Discussing Death

Very few people like to think or talk about death or dying, or what could happen at the end of life if there is a disease process involved. But in-the-spotlight cases like Terri Schiavo have brought the issue of living wills and advanced directives to the public, and forced us to take a closer look… whether we like it or not.

While some may still choose to avoid the issue, it only cause more difficulties for you and your loved ones in the future, and that future may not always be decades down the road. As controversy-laden as the Schiavo case may have been, it really made me aware of the need for establishing a living will; she was only in her 20s when she suffered brain damage and had been healthy and active up to that fateful day in the early 90s. I guess part of me still thought in terms of an old-fashioned movie, where the rich elderly uncle was lying on his deathbed and imparting his final wishes to his family - but that could not be further from the truth.

Marijke Durning, a nurse who writes about medical and health-related issues in a number of venues, has a strong basis for encouraging people to discuss the “undiscussable.” She is currently seeking responses to a survey on Seniors-Support.com to find out just how many people actually have a living will or advanced directives.

According to Marijke, the drive for this survey was based on both professional and personal experience. She writes,

“…I’m a nurse and have worked in acute care, palliative care and long-term care. I’ve seen many, many people not having living wills and have seen them suffering because family members disagree over the care - one would want to let the loved one go, another would want to be aggressive as possible.

Right now, I see people in their very late age in life, 90s and 100+ and while some of them are healthy and happy, very many aren’t. Yet, their family members still fight for them to be treated as aggressively as possible in some cases. This is particularly an issue if the family lives far away and suffers from some sort of guilt. It breaks my heart as a nurse to know that someone who has no more quality of life hangs on because their children feel that they owe it to their parents.”

By no means is this process easy - family members will not always agree on what’s best, and in the case of certain diseases, such as Alzheimer’s or dementia, the wishes of the afflicted individual may be nearly impossible to draw out. In some cases, the dying person may not have any surviving family members who can speak on his or her behalf. Durning witnessed this sad situation many times during her professional life in the intensive care unit, leaving the doctors and nurses to ask the tough questions, for example: “How far should we go to treat? What would they want?”

As the saying goes, nothing in life is certain except death and taxes. But as certain as death may be, we humans change our minds millions of times over the course of our lives, which means that the decisions I might make at age 30 may not be the same when I’m 86 and suffering from cancer. Either way, it’s important to get these issues on the table.

Durning shares her personal point of view:

“…when my children were younger, I thought I’d be OK with “do whatever to keep me alive” just in case there was hope I’d recover. But now that they’re young adults, I don’t want that. I don’t want to waste away somewhere with a tube feeding in my stomach or having someone feed me and change my briefs. If I become ill enough to know that there’s no recovery, I don’t want to be kept alive artificially.”

I applaud Marijke for posting this survey and exploring these topics on her site. Death is never an easy thing, but we need to become more comfortable with talking about it. As with many complex issues in life, I truly believe that education and awareness makes a huge difference in approaching the discussion with more understanding and compassion. I also believe that this will contribute towards a more solid, thoughtful plan of action, rather than a rushed, last-hour deathbed decision.

Durning has a goal of 1000 responses for her survey, with the hope that it would give her a good base for informative articles on helping people understand the decision-making process and its benefits for all involved. Please consider taking the survey - it would be an excellent start to initiating a very important, life-changing conversation. And don’t be afraid to use the d-word.

- Michelle Seitzer

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1. Holistic Junction Haven Says: