

Advanced directives help patients, families

By Bev Davis

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— Decisions regarding end-of-life care should be made while one is healthy and able to think through those choices, said Coralee Hatcher, palliative care nurse at Raleigh General Hospital in Beckley.

“West Virginians seem to be following through with advanced directives (legal documents that express one’s end-of-life care decisions in writing) and with preparing ahead for those difficult decisions,” Hatcher said.

According to statistics compiled by the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care in Morgantown, 39 percent of West Virginians have completed a living will, a medical power of attorney or a combined form. This is the highest percentage in the nation.

Sixty-four percent of West Virginians are aware of do-not-resuscitate laws. This percentage has increased by nearly 20 percent since 1999.

Two-thirds of West Virginians have talked to a family member or close friend regarding their end-of-life treatment desires.

Twenty-one percent of West Virginians have discussed end-of-life treatment desires with their doctors.

“I think people here are becoming more aware of the need to think about these issues,” Hatcher said. “Pain control and comfort at the end of life are prime concerns.”

The word “palliative” means to relieve or reduce pain and discomfort. Palliative care aims to relieve suffering and improve the quality of life for patients with serious illness and their families.

Only 19 percent of West Virginians are concerned about dying in pain. This is an 11 percent drop since 1999, she said.

Patients have several options for end-of-life care, and part of Hatcher’s job is to educate them and their families.

“Many people still don’t realize that nursing homes offer a variety of services, including palliative care. We can also help people learn about hospice services and other resources that are open to them,” she said.

Because there is no one option that’s right for everyone, patients who prepare ahead of time for these decisions are more likely to find the most comfortable and desirable end-of-life care, she said.

“It’s difficult to think about these kinds of things when you’re healthy and everything is going fine. But it’s so much better to have a living will and a medical power of attorney in place so that you don’t have to worry when something does happen.”

It also relieves family members of the pressure of trying to decide what you may want when a situation arises in which you cannot speak for yourself.

“We encourage patients to talk with families and talk about all kinds of things, like whether or not they would want a feeding tube or whether or not they want extreme measures to be taken to resuscitate them in different circumstances. It’s just best to speak up for yourself while you still can,” Hatcher said.

The West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care provides advance directive forms on its Web site, www.wvendoflife.org, at no cost to patients. These forms include the living will form, the medical power of attorney form, the combined medical power of attorney and living will form, and samples of the do not resuscitate card and physician orders for scope of treatment form.

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