

A conversation everyone should have.....

There is only one thing all of us share – and it's not a nice thought – but it is the case that we all share the inevitability of dying in the future. That's just a fact most of us don't like to think about or discuss – which is understandable

However as we all become older it doesn't help anyone just to never talk about this inevitable future. By failing to talk even once with loved ones about what you might face in the future, and failing to make any preparations, all that happens is you leave a legacy to those closest to you of extra distress, difficult decision making, and perhaps even financial problems.

Let's look at just one issue. Most of us will die from an illness which at some point we actually will know is terminal. Many of us also will lose the ability to communicate during that illness. Yet many of us will have clear views as to how we might want to be treated medically (or perhaps not treated) in the last stages of that illness. Many of us would probably not wish resuscitation or perhaps artificial nutrition in the very last stages of our life.

But how can you influence your treatment if you cannot communicate? The answer is you cannot of course. If you do nothing you cede control of the last days of your life to doctors – who may take into account the wishes of your loved ones in deciding treatment but are not compelled to do so. In short you leave a void where decisions are left to others and distress is magnified.

You can avoid this long before you are ever ill by talking to the people closest to you about your wishes if you become so ill you cannot look after yourself and about your treatment wishes if death is imminent. You just need to deal with the subject head on – if you show confidence in stating what you want and talking without embarrassment the conversation need not be difficult or morbid. In fact far from upsetting people such conversations often strengthen relationships and give peace of mind. But having the conversation is not enough. After that you need to make your end of life treatment preferences clear to loved ones and doctors – this can be done by a short document called an advance directive – sometimes known as a living will. Doctors will follow what that document says. Also you should appoint the person or persons closest to you and most trusted by as your attorney or attorneys – again by signing a straightforward legal document called a power of attorney. This gives your attorney legal powers to make decisions on your behalf – including about medical treatment.

Once you do these things you have effectively retained control of the end of life decisions to be taken about you. That simple fact will enable your loved ones to face a distressing time armed with the knowledge that things are being done in the way you wanted – and that is very comforting.

So don't put things off – have that conversation now.