

Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

Taking charge of your life should include planning for final days

By Daniel Casciato
For Pittsburgh Senior News

Making decisions about end-of-life care or medical treatment for a sick or dying loved one is often extremely difficult for families and caregivers. It can be a generous gift of love for seniors to inform loved ones about their final wishes. Difficult as it may seem, talking and planning for your death is actually important to your well being and your loved ones' peace of mind.

Dr. Peggy Stubbs, a member of a grassroots organization called the Take Charge of Your Life Partnership, urges seniors to address their end-of-life decisions before a crisis happens. The mission of the partnership is to educate, support and empower people to deal with end-of-life issues through an innovative network of consumers, professionals, community organizations and corporations. "This is a subject that people often don't want to talk about, so we put it off until we have to deal with it," says Peggy. "Everybody with whom we've worked and talked wishes they hadn't put off making end-of-life decisions."

Choosing how you want to spend your final days is not simple. There are many factors and options available that may influence your care, such as where you would want to die and who will take care of you during your final days. Some things that you should think about and plan for include:

Estate planning

- Who will handle your day-

to-day financial matters if you become incapacitated?

- What should happen to your property and money after your death?

Healthcare

- Do you wish to receive life-prolonging medical treatments?
- How do you feel about being put on a respirator or being resuscitated?
- If you have a particular illness, it's important to know about the kinds of treatment you might receive. Consult your doctor for more information.

Final arrangements

- What type of funeral service do you want? Burial or cremation?
- Is there a specific funeral home or memorial society you prefer?

According to the Allegheny County Medical Society, you should plan well in advance for the time when you cannot make decisions about your medical treatment. You can give directions in advance in case you become unable to make or communicate decisions about your medical care. A healthcare power of attorney allows you to appoint a specific person (an agent) who will have the power to make healthcare decisions for you. A living will tells your healthcare providers what specific healthcare treatments you do not want to receive to prolong life. Obtaining a living will and healthcare power of attorney is as simple as doing an Internet search. Many free documents are available online, including one on the Allegheny County

Medical Society's website www.acms.org. This legal form is accompanied by a clear explanation of the issues and has step-by-step instructions. It also contains a simple form that you can use as your living will and the power of attorney.

Most importantly, discuss these documents with your loved ones. Don't let your end-of-life decisions be a surprise to anyone. But it's not as important to necessarily detail everything you want, according to Peggy. "That's a very daunting task," she says. "Just talk with your loved ones and people in your intimate circle, such as friends, family, clergy or whoever you are close with. Talk about what quality of life means to you and what you would like in terms of someone else watching out for you when perhaps you are incapacitated to make a decision."

Whatever decisions you make for yourself, Peggy recommends documenting everything. "Having a conversation with someone about your wishes and being able to document it in some way will save family members considerable angst when the time comes," she said. "You don't want to be second guessing. There's nothing worse than not knowing what the person would want. It could save your children and spouse from heartache. As hard as it may be to talk about it now, doing so will make it easier to bear during a possible future health crisis."

Once you have recorded your end-of-life decisions, keep the documents easily accessible. Give copies to your loved ones. Documents locked away in a

safety deposit box, for example, may not be immediately accessible in case of an emergency. This may result in your final wishes not being carried out.

Peggy adds that one of the misconceptions about end-of-life is that it's a painful process that you have to endure in isolation. "People need to know that pain can be managed through hospice and palliative care," she explains. "Sadly, many people use hospice as a last resort. By entering a hospice program sooner rather than later, you can receive all the benefits they offer."

Hospice is a program of care that promotes quality of life during a life-threatening illness. Physical, emotional and spiritual care is provided to both the patient and family. Most hospice care is provided at home; however, when patients need additional care to control symptoms, they are transferred to a hospital or nursing home.

A hospice inpatient unit provides care for a limited time period to a small number of hospice patients who can no longer remain at home or in other settings. The hospice unit includes a kitchen and dining room for patients and families, as well as overnight accommodations for family members.

Whatever you decide in terms of end-of-life planning, remember that it's your life and you have a right to control it. For more information about the Take Charge of Your Life Partnership, visit www.takechargeonline.org or call (412) 377-5821. *PSN*