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Discussing the end of life

DEATH: A campaign launched this month strives to help people ensure their end-of-life wishes are carried out.

By JULIE SHERWOOD
jsherwood@messengerpostmedia.com

When Pat Pavelsky's mother approached the end of a long illness last year, Pavelsky was thankful her family had known her end-of-life wishes — and taken the necessary steps to make sure things went the way she wanted.

"It is a fearful topic," said Pavelsky, whose mother, Wilma Kelly of Canandaigua, died last year at age 89.

Though Pavelsky has advised others about the importance of preparing for the end of life through her work as executive director of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County, she experienced first-hand how stressful the topic can be when it hit home for her.

"It is hard to hear," she said, when people you love want to talk about their own deaths. But in the end, she added, you realize how important that discussion is.

For information

Visit www.compassionandsupport.org

Pavelsky

Encouraging families to talk about end-of-life wishes and helping them make plans for that stage is the purpose of a campaign launched last week by the state Medical Society and Excellus BlueCross BlueShield, the region's largest health insurer. The educational campaign includes a recently updated Web site containing videos of people sharing their experiences, along with instructions and information about advance-care planning.

Advance-care planning addresses sudden, unexpected illness, from which one expects to recover, as well as the dying process and, ultimately, death. It allows people to maintain control over

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By the numbers

2,000

Adults surveyed

90

Percent surveyed who said they would want someone close to them making medical decisions on their behalf if they were unable to

42

Percent who have completed a health-care proxy

26

Percent who have completed a living will

Source: 2008 Excellus BlueCross BlueShield survey of upstate New Yorkers

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how they are treated and to ensure they experience the type of care and death they want.

A health-care proxy, which authorizes someone else to make medical decisions, and a living will, which stipulates what treatments a person wants, are the traditional advance directives for adults age 18 and older. The documents are completed ahead of time and apply when a person is unable to make health-care decisions.

"Check the stories on the Web site," said Dr. Patricia Bomba, vice president and medical director of geriatrics for Excellus BlueCross BlueShield.

The campaign is meant to motivate people to have conversations with family members and others who will care for them or be with them as they approach death. It is the first step to advance-care planning, she said, and will help to avoid uncertainty, confusion and conflict over future care.

"We want people to know a health-care proxy is more than a piece of paper," Bomba said.

The Web site, www.compassionandsupport.org, also has information about Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment Program (MOLST). Unlike a health-care proxy, medical orders apply immediately and aren't conditional on a person losing the ability to make his or her own decisions.

A survey done last year by Excellus showed most adults have not completed the necessary documents for advance-care planning.

"There is still a gap between what people want and what they do," said Bomba.

Overall, 42 percent of adults in upstate New York had completed a health-care proxy. The completion rate was highest in the Rochester region, at 47 percent. The Utica region was the lowest, at 35 percent.

Pavelsky said her mother hadn't wanted to be kept alive by extreme measures at the end of her life. The advance-care planning her mother had done made sure her wishes were carried out, said Pavelsky.

"It was a real gift," she said.

What is it?

Health-care proxy

A document, generally no more than two pages long, which allows you to appoint someone else to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to. You can appoint almost any adult. That person can make decisions including authorizing, refusing or withdrawing treatment.

Living will A document that does not appoint a second person to speak for you; it tells your doctor what you don't want if you are incapacitated.