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HOLIDAYS A GOOD TIME TO TALK ABOUT END OF LIFE CARE

Death and dying may not sound like the traditional holiday conversation topics, but the holiday season provides the perfect opportunity for family members to consider how they would like to be cared for at the end of life.

“This is a time of year when families get together to celebrate and to reminisce,” AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said today.

“It is also a time for all family members to engage in relaxed and free flowing conversations. It is the perfect opportunity for people, regardless of their age or health status, to reflect on what living well means to them, and who they would want to make end of life healthcare decisions for them if they are unable to in the future.

“Advance care planning is the best way to plan ahead for end of life care. It is a process of planning for your future health and personal care by ensuring that your values, beliefs, and preferences are known to guide those who will make healthcare decisions on your behalf, should you lose capacity in the future.

“The outcome is an advance care plan that can be recorded in a variety of ways – as an advance care directive, a medical enduring power-of-attorney, a letter, an entry in your medical record, or even a verbal instruction.

“If you already have an advance care plan in place, the holidays are a good time to revise it to ensure it continues to reflect your preferences and goals of care, which may change as you get older or as a serious health condition progresses, and to inform your family members and GP of any changes.

“Having an advance care plan and identifying what matters most ensures you get the care you want, not the care you don’t want.

“Without such a plan, you may have no voice to guide those decisions, and no choice in the decisions made on your behalf, placing the burden of decision-making on loved ones who may have no idea of what care you would actually want, which can leave a legacy of guilt on families.

“Advance care planning, and clearly delineating goals of care, should become a key part of routine healthcare conversations with patients of all ages.

“Your GP in particular can assist with the planning process by discussing your current and possible future health situations, helping you to clearly articulate your preferences and to regularly review your advance care plan.

“While the holidays can be a happy time for many, they can also be stressful and isolating for those caring for a loved one at the end of life, as well as those experiencing grief and bereavement.

“Your GP can play a critical role in supporting you at this time. Don’t hesitate to seek help – it is normal to experience conflicting emotions when it seems that everyone around you is celebrating.”

The AMA *Position Statement on End of Life Care and Advance Care Planning 2014* is at <https://ama.com.au/position-statement/end-life-care-and-advance-care-planning-2014>

Background

The following are excellent resources to help families with discussing advance care planning and end of life care:

- The Advance Care Planning Australia website guides people through the process of advance care planning and provides a range of resources, including information on forms and requirements for advance care planning in each State or Territory, as well as ideas and ‘conversation starters’ about how to discuss your end of life wishes with your loved ones. There are also helpful resources specific to substitute decision-makers and care workers along with resources for health care professionals, including education and online learning. The Advance Care Planning Australia website is at <https://www.advancecareplanning.org.au>;
- Palliative care is person and family-centred care provided for a person with an active, progressive, advanced disease, who has little or no prospect of cure and who is expected to die, and for whom the primary goal is to optimise the quality of life. For more information on palliative care, visit the Palliative Care Australia website at <https://www.palliativecare.org.au>;

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