

On April 16th - Join the Conversation about Your End-of-Life Wishes By: Diana Primavesi, Public Education Coordinator

Isn't it funny how sometimes the most important things in life are the things we never quite get around to doing. Advance care planning and our wishes for end of life care can have a significant impact on our quality of life, but many people avoid thinking or talking about them. In order to encourage more Canadians to find time to address these important issues, April 16th has been named "National Advance Care Planning Day" - a day to reflect on decisions made at the end of life, to begin a conversation with a loved one about your wishes for end of life care, or to review your advance care plan.

Many people avoid advance care planning because it seems complicated, so some definitions may be helpful. One important aspect of advance care planning is identifying a Substitute Decision Maker (SDM). An SDM is a person who is empowered to make decisions on behalf of another individual who is not capable of making his or her own decisions. In Ontario, the Substitute Decision Makers Act outlines a hierarchy of people who can take on this role.

If you wish, you can choose to create a Power of Attorney document which names a specific person or persons to be your Substitute Decision Maker. In Ontario, there are two types of POAs – Property which covers financial assets (e.g., savings, real estate) and Personal Care which covers medical treatment decisions and living arrangements (e.g., move to long term care). Creating a POA document is not mandatory but it is strongly recommended as it provides you with the opportunity to name the specific person(s) who you trust to make decisions for you. Anybody can make a POA document and information and sample forms are available online through the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee. However, many individuals choose to seek legal advice as there are a variety of options and choices to be made when creating a POA and a lawyer can help you determine how best to represent your wishes.

Creating a POA document is only the first step. It is equally important to discuss your wishes with your POA and other family members. You may want to formalize these discussions in a living will, a document in which you outline specific values or requests regarding your end of life care. A living will cannot make treatment decisions for you, but is meant to be used by your Substitute Decision Maker to guide their decisions about your care.

When a person has been diagnosed with dementia, it becomes more important than ever to review the advance care plan. This gives the person an opportunity to make choices about their future decision-maker while they are still able. It is equally important for a spouse of the person with dementia to review his or her own plan. If they have named their spouse as their POA, they may wish to change this at some point given the expectation that the progression of the dementia will result in their spouse being unable to fulfill the role of POA.

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Many people mistakenly believe that an individual with dementia is not capable of decision making or of naming a POA. This is not true. Depending on how their illness is affecting them, the individual may still be able to understand and complete a POA document. If there is uncertainty about an individual's competency to do this, it can be helpful to consult a legal professional for advice.

For more information about advance care planning, visit our website at:

<http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/pklnh/Living-with-dementia/Planning-for-the-future>

You can also find helpful information online at:

<http://www.advancecareplanning.ca/>

<http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/family/pgt/default.asp>

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