

Advance Care Planning – Something We All Need to Think About

None of us knows what tomorrow will bring. A health crisis may affect you or a family member at any time. Advance care planning allows you to have a say in the health care you will receive if you are too sick to speak for yourself. It is a way to reflect on your values, beliefs and wishes so that you can make your own health care decisions. By discussing and documenting your wishes with your loved ones, health care team and family physician, they will be better able to act on your behalf.

Vancouver Island Health Authority Student Nurse Nicole Warren shares her story and thoughts about Advance care planning in the following article:

In November 2012 I was hired as an employed student nurse with the Seniors at Risk Integrated Network (SARIN). Since then, I have had the opportunity to work alongside the SARIN Advance Care Planning RN, attending advance care planning (ACP) home visits and public presentations.



Nicole Warren (second from right) with her grandmother (centre) and family.

As I began to understand the importance of ACP, I decided to approach my grandmother about it. I was curious to know if she had talked to anyone about her future health care wishes. Even though my grandmother and I are close, I felt nervous about bringing it up—this is not the subject of everyday conversation and it can be hard to talk about. It turned out that my grandmother was grateful to have someone in her life who wanted to make sure she is taken care of so her voice will still be heard when she is no longer able to speak for herself.

My ACP discussion with my grandmother triggered a memory. When I was 12 years old, I remember standing at my grandfather's bedside as he was dying. I was too young to really understand death and the logistics of life-supporting and life-prolonging medical interventions. I do remember that most of my family was wondering why my grandfather was not on kidney dialysis to keep him alive. My grandparents had talked about this when my grandfather was still able to make his own health care decisions and he had expressed his wishes then—he did not want to be put on dialysis.

My current ACP knowledge, combined with my experience with the death of my grandfather, made me realize how important it is to have those conversations with your loved ones while you are able. I find comfort in knowing that my grandfather's wishes were known and followed. Although I am only 22, I have completed my own advance care plan. I started the process of ACP by having a conversation to discuss my health care wishes with my family. I've also written down what brings meaning and value to my life. I am currently helping the rest of my family complete their own advance care plans using the Government of BC's advanced care planning guide titled *My Voice: Expressing My Wishes for Future Health Care Treatment*. This resource provides suggestions to help start the conversation.

This conversation can be difficult, but it's important in the process of advance care planning. Talking now means families won't have to scramble to make difficult and emotional decisions later. Dr. Romyne Gallagher, a founding director of the division of palliative care at the University of British Columbia, stated that "most people find if they have some idea what their loved one had in mind, it makes a difference" when considering these emotional decisions.

It also helps to think about and write down values and beliefs, things that bring meaning to your life. This also helps family members make future health care decisions.

The ACP guide includes optional documents like representation agreements and advance directives, along with information to educate people on life-supporting and life-prolonging medical treatments. Everything you need to know in order to do your own advance care plan can be found in the ACP guide.

Death is an inevitable part of life. In my work, I have heard stories and witnessed uncertainty as families argue about what to do. They are trying to make the right decision, but often find themselves guessing what their loved one would have wanted. The sadness and grief that accompanies the end of a life can't be denied. However, as a nursing student, a daughter, a sister, a friend and a granddaughter, I take comfort in the fact that when these conversations occur, families are better prepared. It can decrease guilt and stress when decisions are made based on the expressed wishes of their loved ones.

As you can see, advance care planning is a topic that has affected me professionally and touched me personally. I look forward to continue applying the knowledge I have learned about ACP to my nursing practice and to my everyday life to help improve the quality of life and death within our community. There are many resources available to help you write your advance care plan. Visit Vancouver Island Health Authority's website at: http://www.viha.ca/advance_care_planning/.

For more information:

- [BC Seniors Advance Care Planning Website](#)
- [My Voice: Expressing My Wishes for Future Health Care Treatment](#)
- Advance care planning sessions are offered monthly at the Yakimovich Wellness Centre in Victoria. For further information or to register, see the [Hillside Seniors Health Centre website](#) .