

WV Public Broadcasting Show on End-of-Life Decisions Is Worthwhile

By Dr. Alvin Moss

As one of the states with the highest percentage of persons over 65 years in the nation, West Virginians, the Baby Boomers and their parents, are more likely to have to deal with end-of-life issues than most other Americans. Fortunately, our residents also have some of the best options for getting information and expressing their wishes than those living in other states.

Much has been made nationally about “death panels” and other potential intrusions on our personal freedoms. Although many of these concerns are created to cause alarm, in West Virginia there’s a simple way to ensure you get exactly the treatment you want as the end of life approaches. You can decide what you want, declare those wishes to your family and doctor, and document your wishes in advance directives and, as appropriate, medical orders you can ask your doctor to complete.

In West Virginia, we have a comprehensive system to ensure that people can die comfortably in the setting of their choice. This system is coordinated by the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care, which is funded through the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources.

With this system, our residents can be informed of their end-of-life choices, talk to their family about what they do and do not want, and put their wishes in writing in living and medical power of attorney forms.

Everyone should have a Living Will that indicates what care they do - or do not - want when they are dying and unable to communicate for themselves. Likewise, people should have a Medical Power of Attorney to specify who should make decisions for them when they are unable to.

Depending on your personal condition, you and your physician may also want to consider a “Do Not Resuscitate” card that indicates you are not to receive CPR when your heart stops.

The West Virginia system also includes the option of completing a POST form (Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment) that converts a person’s wishes into medical orders that are honored throughout all health care settings. Research done in West Virginia shows that a person’s wishes as reflected in medical orders on a POST form are respected almost 100 percent of the time.

All four of these forms soon will be part of an electronic registry that will allow medical personnel anywhere in the state to know how to treat you in a medical crisis according to your wishes.

For those with questions about end-of-life care and how people can die comfortably

in the setting of their choosing, I encourage you to take an hour to watch West Virginia Public Television's "The Last Chapter: End of Life Decisions." The program, an "Aging with Grace and Dignity" special, airs at 9 p.m. Monday, Dec. 13 on public television stations around the state.

In the broadcast, families share heartbreaking stories of the consequences of their loved one's not having made decisions regarding their end-of-life care before a medical crisis occurs. On the other hand, individuals who have completed these forms share their peace of mind.

Trained professionals from the West Virginia Center for End of Life Care, Ruby Memorial Hospital, Thomas Memorial Hospital, and Hospice of Southern West Virginia discuss end-of-life care options. All stress the rights of patients to express their wishes for medical treatment, including their right to make changes to their advance directives at any time.

I particularly liked the way the documentary combined natural beauty with candid discussions about life and death.

In this country we have overmedicalized death. We all die. We can die well or in extreme pain surrounded by strangers.

Fortunately, West Virginians can decide for themselves how they want to spend their final weeks, days and hours, and they have great resources and a statewide system to ensure that those decisions are respected when the time comes.

More information on the options and appropriate forms can be obtained from the West Virginia Center for End-of-Life Care by calling 877.209.8086 or going online to www.wvendoflife.org.

For more information and previews of "The Last Chapter," visit www.wvpubcast.org/television.aspx?id=17786.

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