

It's never too early for end-of-life planning

By Eileen Cabral

Death and dying are inevitable parts of life. What people fear most is pain and loneliness. As Atul Gawande said in his book "Being Mortal," our goal is not a good death but a good life — all the way to the very end.

This is why we need a conversation on aging and death. Most people want to have a conversation about end-of-life issues with their family and loved ones, but research shows half never do. Advance care planning is about taking steps to make sure we get the medical care we want, even when we are too sick or hurt to make those decisions on our own. Conversations about our care wishes should be conveyed to family members and doctors

while we are healthy and capable of making our wishes known.

This is especially important for those with a diagnosis of dementia/Alzheimer's who are still able to communicate their own wishes. Conversations may include decisions about a breathing machine, tube feeding or being resuscitated if one's heart stops. Advanced directives are legal documents that allow people to spell out their preferences about end-of-life care ahead of time.

In Massachusetts, the advanced directive is known as the health care proxy. Someone of your choice is designated to make those decisions when you are no longer able to. This person is known as the agent. A physician must determine you are not able to communicate your own

decisions before an agent can make those decisions. If you are temporarily unconscious as a result of an accident, the agent can authorize surgery and other necessary treatments. The agent is your advocate to make sure you get the medical care you want.

A health care agent should be someone you trust to carry out your wishes, such as a spouse, child or friend. It is helpful if the agent lives near you. You should keep the original health care proxy and give copies to the agent, doctors other health care professionals or facilities involved in your care.

A health care proxy can be revoked either verbally or in writing. The revoked document should be destroyed or have the the revocation written across all copies so

there is no confusion when a new document is signed. The health care proxy becomes effective when the person signs it and someone witnesses it. It is a good idea to keep a copy of your health care proxy easily accessible, in your residence, in the event you go to the emergency room. This way it can be included in your hospital record and increases the likelihood that your wishes will be carried out.

Health care proxies are available at hospitals, doctor's offices, health/community agencies and online. They can also be discussed with a lawyer.

Finally, it is time to have the discussion.

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