

Death and Dying – Have the Conversation!!!!

Whilst on a recent trip back to my home town in England I bumped into an old work colleague called Anna. Whilst we were talking she told me that her wonderful stepfather Frank had recently died from prostate cancer. She was obviously sad and wanted to talk, so over a coffee she relayed her story to me. Being a single child, she was very close to her mother, but not her father with whom she had a tenuous relationship. Her mother Fay had worked for the same company as Frank, one day he asked her out on a date, she declined because he was married. Six months later, Frank approached Fay again and said that he was now divorced and living independently, they were married a year later. Frank and Fay were married for 25 years before his death, they had never spent one night apart and had been extremely happy. He had also been a supportive, loving stepdad to Anna.

Frank was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2012, developing lung metastases in 2016, he was still having palliative chemotherapy but was admitted to hospital with pneumonia which was not responding to antibiotics. Anna, her husband and Fay were visiting Frank who was sitting up in bed laughing and chatting, four hours later he was dead.

Fay was devastated so Anna encouraged her mother to stay with her for a while. Anna described how difficult organising the funeral and service had been because her mum and Frank had never discussed any aspect of it. Frank had been on different lines of chemotherapy and living well, so they never expected his death and felt that they had time to talk about it in the future. Fay and Anna both sat up night after night, playing music and discussing what they thought Frank might like for his funeral.

During our conversation Anna reflected on her experience and said that she had not realised just how reluctant people were to talk about death and dying and what was important to them at the end of their life. The experience had challenged her own marriage to question if she and her husband truly knew what each would like or want for their own funeral service and she was in the process of having those conversations and writing them down at the time we met.

Death is a normal part of life and yet it can be one of the most difficult conversations that people struggle to have for many different reasons, as well as the reality of having to face our own mortality. Talking about death has become a modern taboo as we push away all signs of encroaching mortality and strive to look younger and live longer. Historically death used to be openly talked about but in the modern age with improved medical treatments, outcomes and lifestyle, culturally the shift has changed to avoid, repress and even try to deny the fact of death.

People and cultures have different attitudes, beliefs and perceptions about death and dying and evidence suggests that death is still not always talked about openly by the dying person or their family. People avoid talking about death because it is both a difficult subject and the emotions that it provokes are difficult to deal with. Avoidance becomes an easier choice.

There needs to be social change to stimulate conversation about death and dying that encourages individuals and communities to break the silence and fear of talking about death and dying. This is not just a conversation for people living with a life limiting illness it applies to young and old, healthy and sick alike. Planning for our own death and having conversations surrounding this with people that matter to us can be liberating in a manner that prioritises our life goals and respects our wishes at the end of our life.

Many people may have casual conversations about death and dying but unless it is written down and recorded it can be open to misinterpretation and potentially lead to conflict amongst families/carers and care givers. Communicating our personal preferences and wishes both verbally and written, whether formal or informal gives us the opportunity of sharing and connecting in a very profound way with people that matter to us the most and what matters the most to us as individuals. With the emerging focus and greater funding in palliative care, greater awareness and encouragement to talk about death and dying is helping to break the 'taboo' of not talking about it.

On a personal note when my own mother died of cancer during treatment, she had organised the important aspects of her funeral. She had formalised her will and hand written bequests leaving personal possessions to each of us by way of a personal letter, all found easily in her writing desk. She had detailed her wishes of the funeral service and being a Catholic had left bookmarks in her hymn book of which songs she would like sung at her farewell, she had also communicated this to my sister. Her wishes were clear and well documented which left us as a family able to say goodbye in unity and love. We felt the love at this time that she had taken care of everything so that we did not have to, the only sadness was that none of us had really shared those conversations with her.

Share your wishes and write them down!!!

Julia Johnston

Clinical Nurse Consultant

Grampians Regional Palliative Care Team

Advance care planning: have the conversation DOH www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/havetheconversation

Death and Dying, Life and Death
Open University, 2004, Milton Keynes, UK, ISBN 0749259620

Dying to Know – Bringing Death to Life
Andrew Anastasios, PilotLight, 2007, Vic, Australia, ISBN 9781740665537

With the End in Mind – How to live and die well
K Mannix, 2017, London, UK, ISBN 9780008210915

<https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/TalkingAboutDeathDying>

<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/news-alerts/news/talk-about-death-dying>

<https://theconversation.com/au/topics/talking-about-death-and-dying-1905>

<https://lifecircle.org.au/find-information/having-open-honest-conversations/>

<https://palliativecare.org.au>

<http://grampianspalliativecare.com.au/>

<http://www.grpct.com.au/>

CONTACTS

Grampians Regional Palliative Care Team

Ph 5320 3553 Fax 5320 6493

Central Grampians Palliative Care

Ph 5352 9465 Fax 5352 9425

Gandarra Palliative Care Unit

Ph 5320 3895 Fax 5320 3763

Grampians Region Palliative Care Consortium

Ph: 0428 737 330

Ballarat Hospice Care Inc

Ph 5333 1118 Fax 5333 1119

Djerriwarrh Palliative Care

Ph 5367 2000 Fax 5367 4274

Wimmera Palliative Care

Ph: 5381 9363 Fax: 5362 3480

AUGUST 2019



www.grpct.com.au

