



Media Release

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Talking about dying, won't kill anyone

Despite 82% of Australians believing it is important to talk with their family about how they want to be cared for at the end of their life, only 28% have actually done so, according to new research from Palliative Care Australia (PCA).

PCA CEO Liz Callaghan said the survey's release marked the start of National Palliative Care Week (22-28 May), which this year is focussing on 'Living Well with Chronic Illness'.

"National Palliative Care Week is the ideal time to start a discussion with family and friends so they know how you want to be cared for and what values are important to you," Ms Callaghan said.

"Our survey shows 51% of the general population are comfortable talking about death with anyone, and another 26% are comfortable only to discuss it with family and close friends," she said.

One in five respondents had experienced the death of a family member in the past 12 months, and one third of these people had been required to influence or make health care decisions for this relative. Having had earlier discussions about what their family member wanted, helped 86% of them make decisions.

The research findings reinforce the impact early discussions about end-of-life care can have on individuals and family members, particularly at stressful times when they are no longer able to make medical decisions for themselves.

Motor Neurone Disease Australia National Executive Director Carol Birks says the survey highlighted that conversations about end-of-life care had been beneficial for relatives who had experienced the death of a family member in the past 12 months.

"That finding is very reassuring. It illustrates the value of advance care planning and opening up discussions about future care. Family members who know what their loved one wants can continue to care for them by making decisions, based on their loved ones wishes," Ms Birks said.

The survey showed people with complex, chronic diseases – the five leading causes of death according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – were twice more likely than the general population to have discussed end-of-life care.

Ms Birks said informing family members about end-of-life wishes can be a very positive experience for people with advanced chronic disease.

"Writing your wishes down or talking about them can help give you a sense of control over your future. This can be particularly important for people living with motor neurone disease, who often experience a spiralling series of losses," Ms Birks said.

Ms Callaghan said PCA had developed a Discussion Starter, which provides a step-by-step guide with activities to help people talk about their end-of-life care wishes.

"The 'Dying to Talk' Discussion Starter helps people to start the conversation with their loved ones and health professionals," she said. The Discussion Starter is available from www.dyingtotalk.org.au

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