

UW Health: Advance care planning important for future healthcare decisions

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MADISON, Wis. – UW Health experts are encouraging patients to plan for who should make their health care decisions if the individual is suddenly unable to, because the process is more important and less complicated than one might think.

Less than half of UW Health patients older than the age of 65 have a legal document stating their healthcare decisions that goes into effect if they are incapacitated.

Only around 44% of more than 62,000 patients 65 and older at UW Health have this document, formally called an advance directive, in place, according to the Advance Care Planning Team at UW Health.

Advance care planning is the process of planning ahead for future health care decisions to let others know what type of medical care you want if an unexpected event like a car accident or sudden illness happens and you are unable to speak for yourself, according to Dr. Toby Campbell, palliative care medicine physician, UW Health.

By creating a Power of Attorney for Health Care, a legal document allowing another person to make health care decisions for you if you cannot do so yourself, you are able to write down your goals and preferences for future medical care, he said.

According to Campbell, people should think of this as a living document that you can adjust during your lifetime based on new information or changes in your health.

“Because it requires contemplating death, many people delay having these

conversations because they do not feel a sense of need or urgency, but this is a conversation all adults should have, regardless of health, age, or socioeconomic status,” Campbell said. “Advance care planning is a way of demonstrating you care for your family or support network. When I meet with families, they may have to make incredibly difficult decisions while also facing an emotionally taxing situation.”

“By giving them clarity about what you would want and what is most important, you share the load in those moments, reduce conflict now and save them some regret down the road,” he said.

This is especially important because Wisconsin, unlike some states, is not a “next of kin” or “family consent” state, which means that Wisconsin law does not allow next of kin to make decisions in certain situations. Illinois, on the other hand, is a next of kin state.

“It is in your best interest to indicate, for yourself, who you want to speak on your behalf rather than having someone else decide for you,” said Campbell.

Tomorrow is National Healthcare Decisions Day, which was founded in 2008 to inspire, educate and empower the public and providers about the importance of advance care planning.

UW Health offers free virtual workshops to learn more about advance care planning and to learn about the steps necessary to complete your own Health Care Power of Attorney. The workshops are offered twice a month. For more information visit www.uwhealth.org/acp.

A recorded interview with Campbell is available.