

Advance care plans can comfort your loved ones

By Mary Abrahams

Let's face it, we don't like to think or talk about death and dying. However, early and ongoing family conversations can inform end-of-life decisions. We might believe our family is aware of our choices for end-of-life healthcare. In reality, they may not know.

Making decisions about care and needs can be very stressful for surviving family members. It's much easier to have such a conversation now – when death does not feel imminent – than when you are entering the hospital because of a stroke, heart attack or motor vehicle crash.

Creating an advance directive gives you control over your healthcare decisions. It provides information to your healthcare team if you are unable to communicate and guides decisions about your healthcare. An advance healthcare directive provides comfort to your family, preventing them from guessing what it is you would want. Studies show that families who engage in the advance care planning process have less stress, confusion and guilt about their decisions.

An important step in advance planning is to choose a healthcare proxy, also known as a medical power of attorney, healthcare agent or surrogate decision-maker. Everyone over age 18 needs a proxy. Up until then, a parent or legal guardian is automatically considered a child's proxy. But after age 18, that is no longer the case. In fact, in many places, if you are over 18 and have not filled out a proxy, the legal system will choose one for you.

You can start the planning by bringing up the topic with one or more of your loved ones. Then set a time to discuss it, giving your loved ones time to think about the issue. Family members may be less resistant to discussion if the issue is brought up in one conversation and a later date is set to talk.

We are living longer than past generations. Medical technology can extend our lives when we become seriously ill and it can prolong suffering. Patients and their families are often faced with a myriad of choices for treatment. Advance planning always seems too soon, until it's too late.

Learn more on Jan. 24

RiverStone Health invites adults of all ages to learn more about advance healthcare directives at 2 p.m. on Jan. 24 in the community room of Billings Public Library. This free, informational session will begin with a performance of "Lily," a short play written by Bryan Harnetiaux that portrays a realistic discussion of end-of-life care. The play is presented by arrangement with the Hospice Foundation of America. Then we will have time for discussion and questions. Forms for Montana advance healthcare directives will be available to take home. A notary will be on hand for anyone who wants to complete a form that afternoon. Light refreshments will be served.

For more information about the Jan. 24 presentation, contact Mary Abrahams, community outreach coordinator for RiverStone Health Home Care and Hospice, at 406-651-6500.