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Aging series: planning for the end of life

By Suzanne Higgins



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November 23, 2009 · Planning for the end of life is necessary but people don't have a realistic picture of what that entails, according to a West Virginia doctor.

Film and television promote an unrealistic expectation of aggressive life-prolonging and resuscitatory efforts according to family practice physician, Heidi Wehrheim, M.D.

"We do get a false sense that if my doctor does CPR and does give me chest compressions and gives me all this medicine and puts a tube down my throat, I'm going to come out of it and I'm going to be 100 percent normal and that's not the case a lot of the time," said Wehrheim, who practices at Thomas Memorial Hospital in South Charleston.

"The majority of people who arrest have an underlying or multiple underlying issues, and because of a lack of oxygen, because of a lack of blood flow, because of the breaking of the bones; what comes afterwards is often worse than what we started with," she said.

Thomas Memorial Hospital encourages all staff to talk to patients and families about advanced directives.

A Medical Power of Attorney allows an individual to name a person to make medical decisions if that individual is unable to make those decisions.

A Living Will tells a doctor what treatments are not wanted if the individual is terminally ill or permanently unconscious.

Wehrheim says she's seen the trauma families go through when advanced directives are not in place.

"Someone with cancer or end stage heart disease will end up in the IC on a ventilator, can't speak for themselves, with multiple family members, and we don't know who makes the decisions for that patient," said Wehrheim.

Advanced directives are available at most doctors' offices, hospitals, long term care facilities and can be completed without a lawyer.

They are also available through the West Virginia Center for End of Life Care online at wvendofof.org.

Wehrheim says it's never inappropriate or too early to formally complete your wishes and share them with your family.

"Bringing that up early, even at the dinner table, is much less upsetting than having a crisis situation and trying to deal with it



Heidi Wehrheim, a family practice physician, encourages patients to talk to their families about end-of-life directives.

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By Jessica Lilly

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By Sara Sciammacco, Capitol News Connection

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Aging series: planning for the end of life

By Suzanne Higgins

Planning for the end of life is necessary but people don't have a realistic picture of what that entails, according to a West Virginia doctor.

Rockefeller wants changes in health care bill

By Sara Sciammacco, Capitol News Connection

Senator Jay Rockefeller is pushing hard for changes to a health care bill that took its first step forward last weekend. He says it still needs a lot of work.

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then," said Wehrheim. "And there's some peace to be had when all this information is available ahead of time."

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