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"Health officials urge residents to appoint health care proxy"

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People associated with Cape Cod Healthcare's Quality of Life Initiative say it's never too early to discuss end-of-life care.

With National Healthcare Decisions week now under way, they are asking Cape Codders to have a conversation about their beliefs and wishes regarding medical intervention a " and to select a health care agent or proxy who can act for them if they become incapacitated.

"We in medicine have made enormous progress over the past few decades on what we can do for people," said Dr. Don Guadagnoli, chief medical officer for Cape Cod Healthcare.A "The fact we can do it doesn't necessarily mean (patients) would want us to do it."

The Quality of Life Initiative team members, who include doctors, nurses, attorneys and emergency medical technicians, have designed an online toolkit that Cape residents can use to choose a health care agent in a document known as a health care proxy and to fill out other advance care directive tools.

The idea is to give people the tools to become their own advocates, said Tina Soares of the Visiting Nurse Association of Cape Cod and Cape Cod Healthcare.

And it's not just about choosing a health care proxy agent a " it's about discussing one's goals and wishes and what matters most, Soares said.

"For every individual that's going to look different," she said.

A health care agent or proxy doesn't have to be a family member but should be someone the appointee trusts to carry out his or her wishes, Guadagnoli said.

One woman in her late 80s told her son not to approve any heroic measures if her physical condition meant she could no longer teach piano, he said.A Another individual promised a parent who had survived Auschwitz to do everything humanly possible to keep the parent alive as long as possible.

The conversation can touch on a person's desire for pain relief and when and whether to sign a do not resuscitate order.

It's a discussion about values and the way in which one wants to live one's life, Soares said.

But statistics show that while a great majority of Americans have named a health care proxy, only a fraction of them have discussed their wishes with their proxy, said Melissa Weidman of **HopeHealth**, which runs hospice and other programs.

It becomes an issue when a patient ends up incapacitated in the emergency room, and the health

care agent doesn't have a clue about how to proceed, Weidman said.

"It's just healthy planning" to have the conversation, Weidman said.

Choosing a health care proxy and then writing down care choices in a personal directive go hand in hand, said Ellen DiPaola of Honoring Choices Massachusetts, a nonprofit organization that helps people make advanced care plans.

"Everybody needs an advocate in our healthcare system," DiPaola said. "We see the proxy as really a lifelong tool to get you the best care you want through your lifetime.

The health care proxy is only used when patients are incapacitated and can't make decisions for themselves, Weidman said. People can also change their proxies and their personal care directives.

It's important to share the proxy document with medical providers, health officials said.

Without guidance, medical professionals "will do everything that can be done," Guadagnoli said. "Some of it isn't necessarily pretty or very humane."

Cape Cod Healthcare is training its providers on having the conversation about end-of-life care with patients and families, said Weidman, who speaks to senior centers and other groups on behalf of the Quality of Life Initiative.

Many agencies have pulled together to assist Cape Cod Healthcare with the initiative, Weidman said.

"It really transcends all of our differences to do this for the community together."

a " Follow Cynthia McCormick on Twitter: @Cmmcmormickcct.

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