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Queensland doctors urged to take on tough talk

Doctors are being urged to tackle the tough topic of death to give patients choice about their end of life care.

AMA Queensland palliative care specialist and clinical lead of Queensland Health's statewide strategy for end-of-life care, Dr Will Cairns, said the ageing population, coupled with technological advances that can prolong life, means that doctors have a core responsibility to talk about advance care planning with their patients.

“While none of us wants to upset our patients, the inescapable reality is that we must nurture our social skills to fulfil one of the most important tasks for doctors – the communication of information that causes distress,” Dr Cairns writes in the latest version of *MJA InSight*¹

“Our clinical relationships should be based on the common understanding that life is finite and dealing with death a necessity.”

Palliative Care Queensland Chief Executive Officer Shyla Mills said health professionals who have made their own plans for end of life are better placed to tackle the tough subject with their patients.

“We encourage doctors to think about it for themselves and their families and then it’s easier for them to have those conversations with their patients,” Ms Mill said.

Dr Cairns said individuals and the community at large were growing more aware of their right and need to make decisions about their own health care.

As Ambassador for National Advance Care Planning Week 2018 (April 16 – 22), Dr Cairns will travel Queensland to raise awareness among patients and their doctors of the importance of discussing end of life care while they are healthy.

“When doctors shy away from the tough conversations, we are essentially denying our patients as well as their relatives the chance to be involved in decision-making for their own health care,” he said.

Dr Cairns said doctors could expect a growing number of patients and families wanting them to:

- explain why Advance Care Planning is important, how it relates to their circumstances and how to do it properly;
- discuss their values, hopes and wishes – the things that are important to them;
- explore their options and the likely consequences of the treatments;
- use our knowledge and experience to provide guidance for the complex decisions that they may have to make;
- ensure that their decisions are turned into appropriate action plans that will be respected; and
- support them in the future as they deal with the twists and turns that characterise our journey to the end of our life.

¹ <https://www.doctorportal.com.au/mjainsight/>

AMA Queensland has called on GPs to discuss current and possible future health issues with their patients and help them articulate their end of life care preferences.

More information: advancecareplanning.org.au

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