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CONVERSATIONS THAT COUNT: ADVANCE CARE PLANNING AS PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE

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Background

Fundamental to the concept of Advance Care Planning (ACP) is empowering individuals and communities to recognise death as an inevitable part of life.

Methods

ACP facilitators and clinical champions in the Canterbury region of New Zealand have been very active in engaging the community. This has occurred through consumer presentations, the creation of specific pages on the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) consumer information website (HealthInfo) and support of the National ACP awareness campaign 'Conversations that Count'.

Results

'Consumer power' has been invaluable in driving the uptake of ACP in the CDHB. A survey of 49 GPs in 2015 found many were reluctant to start ACP conversations or felt they 'did not have time'. The turning point was the realisation that patients are not only wanting but are actively asking to have these important conversations and to create Advance Care Plans (ACPlans). 1200 electronic ACPlans have now been created in Canterbury, with 80% generated in primary care.

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The ACP pages on HealthInfo are consistently in the top 20 pages viewed each month which indicates that the community is seeking information and wanting to take control. Uptake and demand for consumer presentations and 'Conversations that Count' resources also continues to grow year on year.

Discussion

Increased awareness and understanding of ACP gives people the opportunity to think and frame their reasoning, so they are better prepared to have well informed discussions with health care professionals. It helps them be clearer in their mind about their own limits and concerns. It is important for people to consider the question - "what is O.K for me and what isn't?". In this context, ACP conversations can be seen as preventative medicine.

Patients need to be as well-equipped as possible to be active participants in healthcare decisions, especially regarding end of life. Through the ACP process, unnecessary suffering, confusion and conflict can be reduced or prevented and unwanted or burdensome treatment that is not in line with their goals and priorities can be averted.

Conclusion

Valuing and honouring a person's participation in their health care decision-making is important for all healthcare organisations. Prioritising ACP is an effective way of making this happen. ■