

Exploring Treatment Options— Making Choices

Diana Campbell, Co-op member and former Co-op staff

I like to have as much say as possible in the medical decisions made about me and for me. Don't we all? Most of us want to live the best life possible, given our particular circumstances. I've always been a passionate medical consumer—willing to read, research, and explore all the options. I question things when I don't understand. And I'm very willing to say "no" when I feel strongly about the situation in front of me. I have had a few occasions when I refused a recommended medical procedure or treatment option. Over time I've come to realize how far away I've moved from the old paradigm of following the doctor's orders to the letter without question.

So I represented fertile ground for the message I heard recently from two nurses talking about their experiences during more than 25 years working in hospital intensive care units (ICU). I had heard about their presentation called "the realities of advanced medical interventions." I wasn't even completely sure what that meant, but I willingly showed up at the local senior center to hear what they had to say.

The room was packed with folks who were mostly past 65—all eagerly attentive to the presentation. The presenters had a gentle but matter-of-fact approach to sharing the sometimes grim details of their work. Unless we're involved in the business of health care, most of us have no idea what goes on in the ICU. It was definitely an eye-opener.

Their ease with the subject matter and their comfortable regard for everyone belied the intensity of their message. They covered topics such as CPR, ventilators, feeding tubes, and dialysis with amazing clarity. They presented statistics on the results of these interventions, especially for older people. They shared stories—some from their own families—that illustrated how these interventions helped and sometimes hindered. They even provided show-and-tell with samples of actual tubes and devices. It all served to shake me up quite a lot.



I've always felt I didn't want any big heroics when I was near the end of my life. But I had fallen into the trap of assuming that the medical staff would know what was best for me. Now I know more about the kind of medical interventions available and what those actions mean to a population who are living a lot longer than even just a decade ago. It became clear to me that without my own words defining what I want or not, medical staff would likely default to pulling out all the stops. Not for me! I realized I didn't want family members or others making choices to extend my life, when in reality they could just be prolonging my natural death.

I promptly went home and began to write out what I did and didn't want at my end of life. I already had an advanced directive in place, but I now had more information and could make more detailed choices. This frank discussion about possible outcomes moved me to a level of clarity I hadn't achieved before. My partner was moved to contact her mother's care facility—Mom is 94 and quite frail. After learning that Mom's chart called for a "full code" (the use of any and all procedures to save her life), she changed the instructions to less aggressive measures.

We may live a lot longer now, but we still have aging bodies with all the accompanying frailties. The odds of good outcomes for older people from many of these interventions are definitely not in our favor.

I urge everyone to revisit your own thoughts about your end of life choices. Attend a July 1 presentation (*details at right*) to hear from ICU nurses about the realities of medical interventions. Learn how to ensure that your family and friends know what you want. You can make choices that give you the grace

and power to have the kind of end-of-life experience that you want. You can say "no" to any of the options that might be available. Don't leave the decision to others—make your wishes known. It's up to you!

For information and assistance with advanced care planning, contact Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement at waha.acp@hinet.org or www.whatcomalliance.org.

Having been a caretaker and attended the death of many members of her family and served as a hospice volunteer in Whatcom County, Diana has evolved a compassionate and realistic approach to death and dying.

The Realities of Advanced Medical Interventions

Wednesday, July 1, 6:30–8 pm
Connection Building at the
Downtown store
Free, advance registration
appreciated

Learn about the realities of advanced medical interventions and what they mean to people in various stages of life. Hear updates from experienced intensive-care-unit nurses who work with patients and their families every day. Understand what your options are—and learn how to make your own choices.

For information on additional upcoming presentations, scheduled through November at various locations in Whatcom County, contact micki98226@aol.com.