

## TALKING TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT DYING



**All of us would like to die peacefully, but we can't do it alone. If you want some control over how you die, start talking to your family and doctors, and make your goals known. This is especially important if you want the option of using Washington's Death with Dignity Act.**

The two major medical strategies for peaceful dying are:

- (1) Keep the dying phase short.
- (2) Get optimal palliative (comfort) care.

If you are dying, first and foremost, let your doctors know that you understand your condition and wish to avoid any treatment designed to prolong your life if, in your judgment, doing so would prolong your suffering. A good way to start this dialogue is with a Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) form that summarizes your end-of-life wishes and requires a physician's signature. Take your POLST form, health care directive (also known as a living will, directive to physician, or physician directive), and durable power of attorney for healthcare and discuss the major points with your doctors. You might say to your doctor: "I know I am dying, and I appreciate all you have done to help me. But now my goal is to die peacefully. It's all right for you not to use treatments to prolong my life anymore."

Another approach is to write or type and sign a statement for your doctor in which you state your wish to avoid life-prolonging treatments, and then write, "I give you permission not to prolong my life." A simple statement like that will give you the necessary understanding with most doctors.

If your doctor hesitates or disagrees with any stipulation, give your reasons for and feelings about what you are requesting. Tell your doctor you expect their compliance with your end-of-life requests for medical treatment. If you cannot reach agreement with your doctor now, you should find a new doctor. Ask for a referral to a physician who will honor your wishes.

If you want aggressive palliative care (pain or symptom control) at the end, let your doctor know your preference between relief of pain or alertness, if the amount of drugs necessary for complete relief of pain would cause loss of awareness or coma. For example, you could ask your doctor, "If I am having a lot of pain or uncontrolled symptoms such as shortness of breath, will you be willing to give me enough medication to make me comfortable, even if it takes so much it knocks me out?" Your doctor may answer, "Yes, of course," but you have to ask the question to get the doctor's commitment. By doing so, you are signaling a desire for him to let you determine when and how much pain medicine or sedation is enough, on an ongoing basis. Otherwise, he might assume you want the least amount of painkiller possible so as to avoid

drowsiness or development of tolerance to the drug. And don't worry about broaching the subject in advance; both you and your doctor have a better chance of doing it right if you have had prior discussions.

Ask your doctor if she will be ready and willing to give you enough medication or sedatives to eliminate hunger or thirst if you elect to stop eating and drinking. Ask her if she will be willing to sedate you to unconsciousness if that is necessary to manage your suffering. Ask her if she will honor the same request of your healthcare agent or your family if you become incapable of making decisions. If she says, "Let's talk about that when the time comes," tell her: "No, we need to discuss it now." And remember, medical professionals don't like to commit to anything in advance; so they may hedge their answers. By your questions, your physician will know your wish and will be more likely to honor it as the time approaches. If you already know your doctor is against helping in this way, find another doctor.

If you intend to use Washington's Death with Dignity Act, ask your doctor if he will support your choice when the time comes. If he is not willing, ask for a referral to another physician. Contact C&C for more information and assistance with the Death With Dignity process.

Make all these requests clear in advance with your family and caregivers. Please see the C&C handout, "Talking to Your Family about Dying."

If you get hospice care, ask the hospice nurse the same questions about palliative (comfort) care at your first meeting, but reserve discussions about using the Death With Dignity Act for your physician. Hospice personnel have no official role in the Death with Dignity Act process and some hospice personnel may not be supportive of your choice.

Most importantly, get connected with a Client Service Volunteer from C&C. These are the people who know how to work with medical professionals and can help you achieve a peaceful, humane death. There is never a fee for any service and all contact with C&C is confidential.

Dying peacefully takes a little work. To have a good death, you need to be your own forceful advocate.

C&C also has a "Letter to Your Physician" that can be used to help you to talk to your physician about the option of aid in dying.

Our website has this and many other patient resource documents available:

[www.CandCofWA.org](http://www.CandCofWA.org)