

Quality of Life

The sun is shining through your consulting room window, you have a full day of interesting patients booked, life is good.

Your first patient comes in and presents you with a Living Will which she would like you to keep on file. What is your first reaction?

- How wonderful. This might help me to complete my work with the patient by supporting her with minimal medication in her last weeks, days or hours.
- Oh no. The patient wants me to help her with euthanasia and that goes against my religious or spiritual beliefs.
- What a nuisance. Its hard enough running a practice, how will I find time to visit or represent her.
- Oh dear. This reminds me of my distress when my best friend died prematurely of cancer.
- Aaagh. Does this mean I'll have to use Ars.Alb. in high potency. I'm scared to do it and I've never been with anyone while they die.
- How interesting. Let's spend the first few minutes of the consultation discussing her request and wishes.

Generally the British are not good with death. But this is about Life, Quality of Life, which ideally leads to a Quality of Dying and Death. The patient's request demonstrates that she is making plans to maintain the quality of her life for as long as possible. She is making an informed choice to receive the least possible allopathic medication because it tends to maintain quantity rather than quality of life.

However, back to the sunny consulting room: what do you say? The following information may help to prepare you for a discussion.

Perhaps the most complete and fascinating source of information on the quality of life and death comes from the Natural Death Centre * which produces a Living Will pack for only £5 as well as an excellent and uplifting book (The Natural Death Handbook, £13.50 incl. p&p.) which includes information on woodland burials, a befriending service, 'creative endings' and much more.

*A living will (often known as an 'advance directive' or 'advance refusal') allows you to state which treatments you would or would not want if you became seriously ill in the future and could not say what you wanted to happen. Some people confuse the issue of refusing treatment under a living will with voluntary euthanasia. The two issues, although related, are separate. If you make a living will you are asking doctors not to give you certain medical treatments. Voluntary euthanasia is when you ask the doctor to deliberately end your life. (The Voluntary Euthanasia Society ** leaflet)*

A living will can be also drawn up by a solicitor or there are standard formats available which can be adapted to suit the patient's wishes. It can be acted upon only if two independent physicians (one a consultant) are of the opinion, after a full examination of the patient's case, that s/he is 'unlikely to recover from illness or impairment involving severe distress or incapacity for rational existence'. It follows, therefore, that it cannot be acted upon in the stressful and hurried conditions of an unexpected emergency admission to hospital.

Your discussion will also, of course, be guided by the patient's current state of health: is she making plans for the near future because of a diagnosed terminal illness or extreme old age, or is she making long-term plans which might outlive your own time in practice.

It would be important to ascertain what expectations the patient has regarding your ability to visit her, wherever she is, and the relationship she hopes for between her doctor/s and yourself.

And it is especially important that you are personally able to cope with the time implications of visiting and any possible emotional effects. Almost certainly a discussion with your supervisor will be needed.

And finally, the Arsen. Alb. question and its mysterious, mythical reputation as a 'euthanasia remedy'. *(SEE SEPARATE QUALITY OF LIFE ARTICLE, IF PUBLISHED WITH THIS ONE)*

- * The Natural Death Centre, 6 Blackstock Mews, Blackstock Road, London, N4 2BT. 020 7359 8391. www.naturaldeath.org.uk
- ** The Voluntary Euthanasia Society, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG. 020 7937 7770. www.ves.org.uk

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