



'It's always too soon — until it's too late'

By Ellen Waldman

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For the last five years, Choosing Options, Honoring Options (COHO) (cohoroguevalley.org; 541- 292-6466) has been offering a spring series of presentations. Their main focus has been to support and provide information for advance care planning, and the all-important conversations around end-of-life needs.

This month, these talks will be held at the Smullin Health Education Center, 2825 E. Barnett Rd, Medford, and are offered at 2-3:30 p.m. and again at 7-8:30 p.m. on the following dates: March 31; April 7; April 14; and April 28. These are all free to the public and donations are gratefully accepted. No reservations are needed. The following information was provided by Virginia Heenan, a long-time volunteer with this program and a member of the COHO Education Committee.

The first event, scheduled for March 31, is entitled "It's Always Too Soon until it's Too Late." I have adopted this premise myself and quote it frequently when encouraging individuals to get their planning in front of their needs. The keynote address will be given by Dr. Steven Pantilat from UC San Francisco, an experienced and award-winning palliative care physician (profiles.ucsf.edu/steven.pantilat). His training, experience and background are quite impressive, and this promises to be an exceptional talk on considering palliative care. Not everyone is familiar with this care option, which is utilized as treatment for those with serious illness, but not necessarily near the end of their life. The care focuses on alleviating painful symptoms and other discomforts, and providing relief and support to the person and their families.

These are the subsequent talks:

April 7: "Planning Care for a Changing Self: Advance Planning for Dementia and Alzheimer's." The speakers will be Patrick Gillette, M.D., a local internist and Alzheimer's researcher, who's an expert in this field; and Robb Miller, co-author of Washington's Alzheimer's and dementia mental health Advance Directive. (EW: Our current version in Oregon does not currently address the different needs, wishes and requirements of those who receive a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or related dementias. It's encouraging that the state of Washington has already taken steps to address this in their Advance Directive.) They will present tools that can be used for planning, including locally generated supplements to the Advance Directive. They will describe the benefits of early diagnosis which might slow the disease, and allow advance care planning to include family and professionals. A Youtube video will be shown featuring someone who's been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's, describing how he wants his wishes to be honored when he can no longer speak for himself.

April 14: "Oregon's Death with Dignity Law: A Compassionate Conversation," with speakers Dirk Woods, M.D., Rogue Regional Medical Center emergency medicine specialist; Diana Spade, M.D., retired anesthesiologist and medical director for Southern Oregon Compassion and Choices; and William Toffler, OHSU professor of medicine and national director of Physicians for Compassionate Care. They

will discuss the essentials of the Oregon Law and implementing this option in coordination with the organization, Compassion and Choices (www.compassionandchoices.org; 800-247-7421).

April 21: "The Prodigal Son: A Theatrical Presentation." Here's the description for this event: COHO Threshold Thespians (featuring Shirley Patton, Peter Quince and Judith Rosen) present what happens when Mom is hospitalized and unable to express her choices about care to her two adult children, and a long-brewing conflict erupts. A second enactment of the same scene goes very differently because, years before, they had "the conversation."

April 28: "Choosing to Plan: Starting Your Advance Directive." For this event, John Forsyth, M.D., retired cardiologist and emeritus chair of COHO, presents information regarding the Advance Directive: what it includes and how it is used; the important contribution of conversations about end-of-life care; and the importance of timing in discussing and completing an Advance Directive. There will be time to have your questions answered.

I recently visited with a woman in Ashland whose family realized she never created her own Advance Directive. Although still highly functioning in her life at 84 years old, early signs of short-term memory gaps were noticed. At this point, Anne found it much more difficult to organize her thinking around these vital decisions. She is receiving help from local professionals to help her understand her options, and get this document in place. She's scrambling to do just that, and now wishes she had begun this process years ago, by having ongoing conversations with her family members.

This series of public talks is a wonderful opportunity for everyone to hear from the most advanced professionals on this all-important topic. I hope you find one or more sessions that interest you, and plan to attend these talks. You're not a moment too soon, guaranteed.