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NEW STUDY: End-of-Life Discussion, as in Oregon, Benefits Patients, Families

A new study reported in the current *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* found that patients and their families benefit from having end-of-life discussions with their physicians. The study found that open communication increases hospice enrollment and lessens anxiety and depression. The study confirms the benefits of Death with Dignity laws and Terminal Patient Right to Know laws, such as a recently enacted California law mandating such a discussion, upon terminal patients' request. JAMA has reported that terminal patients who have an end-of-life discussion with their physician are more likely to receive hospice care and less likely to enter an Intensive Care Unit.

The new study involved 638 patients in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Texas who helped determine their end-of-life care after learning that chemotherapy had failed for advanced cancer and their life expectancies were less than a year.

"The latest study confirms the benefits of the Oregon Death with Dignity law and the need for other states to adopt such laws, and to enact laws like California's recently-adopted Terminal Patients' Right to Know Act (AB 2747). Dying patients may suffer greatly without crucial information. We also know that people with end-stage cancer may suffer through rigorous, futile chemotherapy treatments weeks, or even days, before death because they think they have no choice," said Barbara Coombs Lee, president of Compassion & Choices. "Doctors are not always straightforward about the true prognosis and offer false hope. As a result, treatments can leave patients too weak for spending quality time with loved ones,

rectifying relationships, or seeking spiritual peace. When patients have full information about all of their options, they are empowered to knowingly choose – or refuse – difficult treatment.”

The study revealed that patients who had these frank discussions were no more likely to become depressed than those who did not. And, they were less likely to spend their final days in hospitals, connected to machines. These patients, who knew death was near, often avoided costly, futile care. And, their loved ones were more at peace after they died, the study said.

Telling patients that they are dying allows them to prepare for their deaths. They get to decide how to spend their final days.

Outside Oregon, a majority of critically ill patients don't get the opportunity to openly talk about their end-of-life options and receive complete information to make informed choices. According to the federally funded study, only one-third of terminally ill cancer patients say their doctors have discussed end-of-life care.

“As an organization working with the dying for 28 years, we know that information and counseling regarding end-of-life care options are essential to the comfort and peace of many terminally ill patients and their families,” said Lee. “These poignant conversations help patients weigh all options and make an informed decision that reflects their values and beliefs. It gives the physician an opportunity for a heartfelt discussion of the benefits and risks of all available treatments, and it can facilitate earlier access to hospice care.”

The study, *Associations Between End-of-Life Discussion, Patient Mental Health, Medical Care Near Death, and Caregiver Bereavement Adjustment*,” is posted here: <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/short/300/14/1665>

For more information please visit www.compassionandchoices.org

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