

PUTTING YOUR PATIENT FIRST

By Agency for Integrated Care

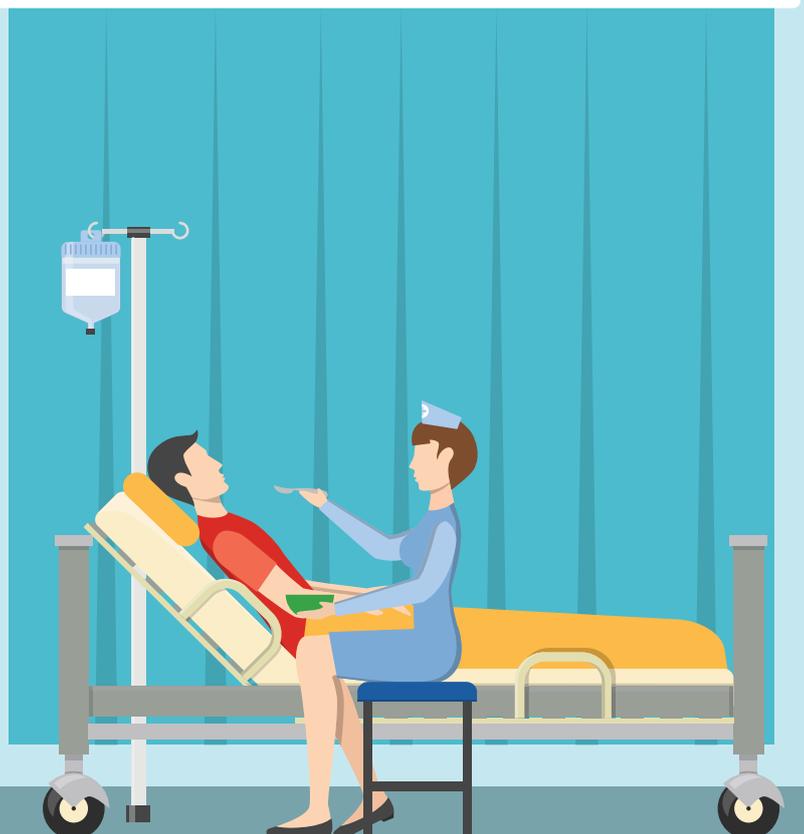


As the main and first line of healthcare, GPs like you are in the best position to support patients in ageing well in place and having a better quality of life. Starting timely Advance Care Planning discussions can uphold your patients' respect and dignity, making sure their care is always patient-centric. Also, having such end-of-life conversations with your patients and their families helps build trust and a sense of teamwork, which is crucial to providing good care.

In cases where patients do not have the mental capacity to make decisions, doctors are within their rights to exercise clinical judgement on what would be an appropriate course of treatment. But what is also important is what the patient would have chosen if he was able to. Advance Care Planning empowers your patient to consider, nominate, and document a proxy decision maker so that your patient still has a voice when needed. This benefits

all parties involved in medical care - patients, their proxies or family members, and health care providers, especially doctors.

Other common documents that are usually brought up in this situation are the Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA) and Advance Medical Directive (AMD). An LPA nominates a legally recognised proxy to decide issues pertaining to personal welfare and/or property and affairs. The AMD documents one's decision to not use extraordinary life-sustaining treatments to prolong the dying process of a terminal illness. Whilst an LPA states who can legally make decisions, and the AMD can inform the doctor when to stop life-sustaining treatment, there remains a lot unsaid between the purview of the LPA and the AMD. Advance Care Planning fills this gap by addressing the patient's preference for or against issues such as extent and limits of medical intervention, place of care, and place of dying amongst others.





Dr. Irwin Chung is Director, Primary Care Academy of the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics. He has over 20 years of experience as a clinician. During his time at Agency for Integrated Care, he was instrumental in establishing the practice of Advance Care Planning in Singapore. As a practicing GP, he shares with us the value of Advance Care Planning to the clinician.

How has Advance Care Planning helped you to make informed decisions about your patients' care?

As a rather idealistic medical student and even as a young doctor, it would not be odd to hold to the belief that one has the answers to a myriad of healthcare challenges presented by my patient. There are always diagnostic tests, treatment options, procedures, medicines, etc. to call upon to uncover and manage a patient's ills. What we often forget as medical practitioners is that the ills are not ours to own; they belong to the patient. As doctors, our role is not to claim them for our own and get at them come what may, as the patient is ultimately the master of his own destiny. That's recognising personhood and autonomy. Being familiar with the principles and practice of Advance Care Planning has definitely helped in building that awareness. Today, I always ask, after presenting my opinion to a patient, "Will that be alright with you?" or "Do you have any concerns?"

How has Advance Care Planning changed the way you doctor?

It has made me realise that there is much more to a person in the form of a patient than merely disease (or sometimes the apparent lack thereof). I remember when I was younger, I would get really exasperated and impatient when patients stubbornly refused proposed treatment. "You will surely die/be miserable/suffer a lot/regret not taking my advice!" would often resound in my head or even fly out of my lips at times. Today, I make sure I do my best to present the most appropriate and commensurate options to the patient, hear their views, empathise with their concerns, and reassure with a "Okay, I hear you. We'll make the best of that decision." With an Advance Care Plan, we can be assured that we, and the patient's loved ones, will continue to hear the voice of the patient for as long as it is necessary. That is the essence of care.

Sometimes, Advance Care Planning is seen as part of palliative care, when treatment is no longer effective for the patient. Rather than signaling a path of non-curative treatment, Dr. Chung offers the opinion that an Advance Care Plan focuses on "making sure the patient is able to exercise his autonomy in decisions on his care options". While it is typically thought to only apply to those with chronic illness or in a terminal stage of life, an Advance Care Plan is a personal life decision that every patient, even healthy ones, can begin today.

Everyone can play a part, whether you are working in a hospital or in primary care. If this has piqued your interest, and you would like to receive more information, training, or discussion materials, please contact the Primary Care Engagement team at gp@aic.sg or **6632 1199**, or visit Primary Care Pages (www.primarycarepages.sg)

