

Make End Days Your Own

By Loretta Sword

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Individuals who want to avoid life-prolonging treatments in a hospital -- or who want to be free to exercise the right to refuse all nutrition and hydration -- have the legal right to make those choices in every state.

But that doesn't mean all hospitals, nursing homes and assisted living centers will cooperate with such wishes, even in cases involving notarized, written advance directives.

Representatives of Compassion and Choices were in Pueblo last week to advise people about ways to avoid the obstacles that a New Mexico couple encountered after advising the staff at their Las Lunas assisted living center that they had begun the process of hastening their deaths.

Neil Rudolph said his parents, both in their 90s, had told him and his sister about their wishes regarding end-of-life care -- and how they hoped to die -- years earlier. He said the assisted center staff at first voiced no objections to their plan to stop eating and drinking.

Once the couple was into the process, however, legal advisers got nervous about it and tried several avenues to stop them.

They called 911 to report a double-suicide attempt. Firefighters who responded listened to the couple's explanation and refused to transport them anywhere. Then the center issued an eviction notice, calling for the couple to immediately vacate their apartment.

Rudolph's father was in constant pain because of spinal stenosis, and his mother was barely mobile enough to get from her bed to the bathroom and back, with lots of help.

Rudolph said he and Compassion and Choices representatives were able to convince the center to stick to its own 30-day-notice rule regarding evictions, knowing that his parents no doubt would be dead in that amount of time.

But he ended up renting a small nearby home and moving them there instead because both feared harassment or a possible cessation of the process that by then was well on its way. They died peacefully, within a day of each other, in January, and Rudolph said his work with Compassion and Choices is a way of honoring them because they were so adamant about having control over how and when they died.

Rudolph urged nearly 50 people who attended an information session Thursday at the Senior Resources Development Agency to make all of their end-of-life wishes known to family members and to get them in writing. He also advised them to look closely at contracts with assisted living centers if they live in one.

Compassion and Choices offered free copies of a contract "rider" that should eliminate any confusion, and spokesman Roland Halpern said the organization offers free advice and assistance of many types to individuals and family members who are having difficulty making end-of-life choices or executing them.

Launched in 1980 as The Hemlock Society, the Denver-based organization has gone through several transformations since then.

"Today, it's all about choices and options, and there are many choices and options" for people who don't want life-prolonging medical care, or who want to hasten death in terminal situations.

Halpern said many hospitals define nutrition and hydration as medical care, but the U.S. Supreme Court does not.

The high court has affirmed the right of individuals to refuse such care in all public and private settings, he said, and also differentiated the refusal of food and water from active suicide.

"Voluntarily stopping eating and drinking, or VSED, is not suicide," he said.

Suicide is choosing death over life, while refusing hydration and nutrition is a way of "choosing one kind of death over another."

He said the process takes an average of seven to 14 days, and that most people are semi-conscious for the last 10 days or so. Death usually is caused by renal failure, which begins within days of ceasing hydration.

Deprived of calories and moisture, the body first consumes all carbohydrates within its own tissues and then begins breaking down fat. That process, called ketosis, produces substances called ketones that act as a natural painkiller and can produce a mild euphoria, Rudolph said.

Many individuals who choose VSED to hasten death find the period of ketosis to be a pleasant, pain-free time when they can enjoy final visits with family and friends, Rudolph and Halpern agreed.

Halpern said Compassion and Choices has embarked upon a statewide public education campaign in the hope that medical professionals and organizations will better understand laws regarding end-of-life choices and work to help patients have the deaths they want rather than forcing people to live longer in pain, and without hope of recovery or even improvement.