

Start the Conversation: National Healthcare Decisions Day

National Healthcare Decisions Day (NHDD) has become an annual event devoted to raising awareness about advance directives and about the importance of communicating one's wishes regarding care at the end of life. Since its inception in 2006, NHDD -- which began in Virginia -- has expanded to include hospitals, state organizations and other agencies across the country. This year, 110 national organizations and roughly 1200 state/local organizations participated in NHDD, including Einstein Healthcare Network.

Einstein first participated in NHDDA in 2011. A multidisciplinary group was formed that designed and organized the event. The goal of the day was to raise awareness about the importance of having conversations with loved ones about end of life preferences without advocating a particular position about end of life or "pushing" completion of advance directive documents (i.e., living wills or durable power of attorneys for healthcare). Our audience was patients, visitors, and employees. We named our event, "Start the conversation." The marketing department created buttons and banners with this title and was essential in helping to advertise the event. Anonymous personal experience stories involving the communication of wishes related to end of life were solicited and printed up for discussion and distribution at the event.

Ninety-one volunteers, from many different departments and who typically did not have much work-related connection with end of life, participated in educational training sessions. They staffed informational tables set up across the Network. A resource list with names and contact numbers for individuals (chaplains, social workers, ethics consultants, and attorneys) was compiled and prepared for distribution, along with other written materials about advance directives

and some moving, anonymous personal stories. Our CEO, Barry Freedman, sent out a letter to all employees supporting the importance of the event. An institutional program focused on the sharing of the experiences of professional caregivers (Schwartz Rounds) took on the topic of end-of-life care experiences for that month.

On the day of the event, employees and hospital visitors could be seen at the various tables. Anecdotal reports indicated that the conversations with individuals approaching the tables varied from information seeking to the sharing of personal experiences.

In order to evaluate the event, we surveyed the volunteers (hospital employees) about their experience; what they heard in their conversations; and whether participation in the event had any impact on their own interest in completing an advance directive document. We constructed a short, 6-item survey that could be completed anonymously using the SurveyMonkey™ online program. The link to the survey was sent to all volunteers who staffed tables during this event.

The overall response to the event by the volunteers was very positive, with eighty individuals responding (88% response rate). Volunteers reported that they spoke with both employees and hospital visitors during the event. Questions, concerns, and issues voiced by people with whom the staffers spoke covered a broad range of topics. The most frequently mentioned questions had to do with legal concerns and instituting advance care planning documents in the hospital. Volunteers reported that those who approached them were appreciative of information, shared personal stories with them, and discussed the difficulty of having a conversation with family. Some revealed their own discomfort with the

topic for themselves. A few mentioned the need for materials in other languages, and a few raised questions about the hospital's motive in having such an event. Many individuals approached the tables and took the materials but did not engage in conversation.

In order to gauge the impact of the event on the volunteer, we asked which actions the respondent felt (s)he would be likely to take related to advance care planning. Close to one-third (31%) said they were likely to do more thinking and / or reading about the topic. The majority (66%) noted that they were likely to talk to family members or close friends about this topic. Two respondents said they weren't planning to do anything related to advance directives. A little less than one-quarter of the volunteers reported that they already had an advance care planning document (either a living will or durable power of attorney).

As a result of the feedback received, we are working to educate our employees about the importance of "starting the conversation." We plan to make Einstein's participation in NHDD an annual event. ■

Lynne R. Kornblatt, Esq.

*Vice President, Human Resources
KornblattL@einstein.edu*

Etienne Phipps, PhD

*Director, Einstein Center for Urban Health Policy
and Research
Einstein Healthcare Network
PhippsT@einstein.edu*

For more information about National Healthcare Decisions Day visit: <http://www.nhdd.org/>