



Advance care planning in general practice

Empowering patients to plan ahead

Advance care planning – planning for your future health care – is important for everyone, yet many people know very little about it. With assistance from COORDINARE, Parkes Street General Practice in Helensburgh is one of four medical practices in the Illawarra region taking action to help their patients learn about and plan for the end of life they hope for.

With an ever-increasing number of older patients, Parkes Street General Practice decided to seek funding to launch their Advance Care Planning Project in February 2021. According to lead medical practitioner, Dr Cindy Htet, General Practices are ideally placed to deal with this issue.



"We all need to determine our own health care wishes, yet somehow many of us neglect the issue of advance care planning," she explains. "General Practices have constant exposure to patients over a long period, so it makes sense that we are the ones to discuss this topic with people and help them plan for the future."

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The first step of the project involved the Practice's doctors, nurses and Practice Manager completing online training in advance care planning (ACP) offered by [The Advance Project](#). The Practice then added an ACP template to their Over 75 Health Assessment, and set about inviting their elderly patients to make an appointment to discuss ACP – initially with a nurse, with take-home educational materials provided – and then with their GP. They also promoted the importance of ACP through social media using the [Love is Not Enough video](#) developed by Advance Care Planning Australia.

"When doctors and nurses are armed with the knowledge and skills, they are able to help patients understand how important and empowering advance care planning can be," says Dr Htet.

In the first two months of the project, the Practice has been able to discuss ACP with 28 patients, 14 of whom have chosen to put in place an Advance Care Directive. Asked what has been learnt so far, and what advice she might give others considering implementing an ACP project, Dr Htet says allowing sufficient time, providing accurate information and taking a team approach are all critical.

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"Advance care planning is a sensitive topic. Patients don't always want to talk about it – they need time, information, and gentle encouragement. It's also very important to take a team care approach. All Practice staff need to be on board and working together to make it work."

In time, the Practice aims to extend the project to include their younger patients and those with chronic health issues, as well as educate the wider Helensburgh community through online community education sessions and social media engagement.

"We want to make long-term changes," explains Dr Htet. "We are at the first step now, but we intend for this to be sustainable and ongoing. ACP is good for patient care." For more information about advance care planning, go to [Advance Care Planning Australia](#) or [the Advance Project](#).