

Excellus: End-of-life care survey shows disparity Upstate

By Eric Reinhardt

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SYRACUSE — Most upstate New Yorkers believe it's important to have someone close to them making medical-care decisions on their behalf in the event a terminal condition impairs the patient's ability to communicate.

That's according to a recent survey from Excellus BlueCross BlueShield released April 16. It shows 90 percent believe in the merits of a health-care proxy.

But the survey also shows only four in 10 have designated a health-care proxy to ensure their wishes are actually carried out.

Excellus BCBS says the numbers are part of what it contends is the most comprehensive survey on advance-care planning values and actions ever done in upstate New York.

A living will, the other major document that is part of advance-care planning, specifies a patient's wishes and guidelines for medical care if he develops an irreversible terminal condition.

Eight of 10 survey respondents acknowledged the importance of a living will, but only 26 percent had completed their own.

"What is unusual about the results of this survey is that the completion rates on health-care proxies are higher in upstate New York regions than the 30 percent range we've seen in national surveys," says Dr. Patricia Bomba, Excellus BCBS's vice president and medical director for geriatrics and a national expert on advance health-care planning.

The survey shows a 40 percent completion rate on health-care proxies in Central New York, a 35 percent rate in the Utica region, a 44 percent rate in the Southern Tier, and a 47 percent rate in the Rochester region.

The findings also indicate 35 percent of respondents in Central New York said their doctor had spoken with them about health-care proxies and living wills. The figure was highest in the Rochester region at 47 percent and lowest in the Utica region at 27 percent. In the Southern Tier, 34 percent said their doctor had spoken with them about living wills and health-care proxies.

The survey also asked respondents why they hadn't completed a health-care proxy. Roughly 27 percent didn't feel it was needed or important, and 21 percent didn't know enough about it.

Other respondents either felt they were too young to be concerned about it (12 percent), hadn't bothered to consider it (11 percent), didn't know where to get the forms (5 percent), didn't know who to designate as their health-care proxy (5 percent), or were uncomfortable thinking about such things (5 percent).

The survey also found that age is the most important factor affecting completion rates for health-care proxies and living wills. The findings indicate people are much more likely to get involved in advance-care planning as they get older, especially after reaching age 65.

In addition, women were more likely than men to report completing health-care proxies (46 percent vs. 36 percent) and

living wills (28 percent vs. 23 percent). And among those who had completed advance directives, over 90 percent have shared their wishes with their family and close friends.

The survey was conducted between March 6 and April 6 on a random sample of 2,000 adults, 18 and older, who reside in 39 upstate counties.

Bomba says the poll indicates that employers have made some progress in motivating employees to be proactive with advance-care directives, but it also provides an opportunity for improvement.

"The survey results, including the regional variations, affirm the importance of having business clients join Excellus in efforts to bridge the gap of values and actions, as many employees are dealing with end-of-life issues with family, neighbors, and close friends and are struggling to balance their professional and personal responsibilities," says Bomba.

Bomba also says Excellus BCBS is urging companies to look at advance-care planning as an important health-promotion initiative and educate their employees on the issue. She also recommends consumers

consult a program Excellus BCBS has developed called Community Conversations on Compassionate Care (CCCC), which aims to promote conversations and actions that motivate people 18 and older to complete traditional advance directives.

Bomba says CCCC is a program featuring consistent messages on advance-care planning and community resources, including a booklet, interactive workshop, video, and online resources. □

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