

Dr. Nuala Kenny
Public Lecture entitled
Ethical Dilemmas in End of Life Care
Antigonish, Nova Scotia
February 6, 2008

The Guysborough – Antigonish Strait Health Authority (GASHA) recently developed an Advanced Care Directive policy for end of life care.

An Advanced Care Directive: is an agreement between the patient and a designated person who would carry out the wishes of the patient to include, types of treatment, ethics, religious beliefs, technology, at a time when that person could no longer speak for themselves.

Raising the awareness of the program, Dr. Nuala Kenny, spoke passionately to an audience of medical staff and the interested public, on what kinds of things create dilemmas in end of life care.

She noted that the biggest dilemma that loved ones find themselves in is when there is no advance planning and when no one is sure of what is the right thing to do.

She encouraged the importance of making the provisions for advanced care while we are able to. She emphasized the importance of clarifying your values, and the importance of making them known to your family or caregiver and having conversations about them. Conversations; conversations; conversations is how she described good communications. Without letting your family, know what you want, and having conversations about them they will not know what to do when death is near.

She noted that death is not a disease and cannot be cured. A time to die will come and we must recognize that there is a difference between eating and drinking, and the provision of nutrition and hydration through artificial means.

Death is a process that happens to everyone, and we need to think of it as a natural and normal part of life.

Withholding/withdrawing non -benefiting and potent interventions is a duty and should not be confused with passive euthanasia or doctor assisted-suicide.

We are a death-denying culture, because we think death is a failure. We have medicinalized dying. She outlined three goals of medicine as

- #1. To cure,
- #2. To improve function,
- #3. To care for the dying.

We should not have unreal expectations, and we have to realize the limitations of modern medicine.

She talked about the importance of palliative care, in the area of pain and symptom control, social, psychological, emotional and spiritual support. Palliative care is not always available, sometimes it is easier to get a heart transplant than to get palliative care. And when you are dying it is not the doctor that you want or need. She said dying is a precious gift and that last moments should be spent in a palliative environment. Palliative care addresses the physical and psychological aspects of end of life.

She is against physician- assisted suicide, but is aware that some doctors believe that it is a physician's duty to assist. She noted that support for physician participation in assisted suicide is increasing and that some doctors jump too quickly to discontinue end of life care. That leaves some people at risk such as those with intellectual disabilities, aged, and young children with physical disabilities. Slippery-slopes are real we should be aware that they exist.

She praised the local health authority for having taken on the issue of developing an advanced care planning policy. This lecture is to create public awareness and to educate the public on the importance of advanced care planning. She created a relaxed environment with some humour and put a human and dignified face on the very complex issue of death and dying.

Dr. Nuala Kenny is a renowned ethicist and professor of Bioethics and Pediatrics at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She founded the Department of Bioethics at Dalhousie in 1996. She now devotes herself to bioethics full-time. Her complete biography can be found at the Dalhousie University Bioethics Department website.

Shirley MacDougall
February 26, 2008