

THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE

probably would have felt it whenever I carked it. It just brings it on. I mean, it just means you feel sad then rather than feel sad later on when it actually happens.

Paul's mum

Paul: I can give you an example with my own mother. She was in a nursing home in Canberra and although she was getting sicker and sicker she still had all her faculties.

She said to me, "Oh, Paul. I've had enough. I don't want to wake up anymore." So I talked it over with the nursing home staff, and they said, "If that's her wish." They had a talk to her too.

We all had a talk to her about it and we all agreed that she didn't want to be resuscitated if she died.

Not long after, I got a call from the nursing home saying, "This could be it, Paul. Your mother's got bad pneumonia, and she's gone into hospital. We're going to talk to the hospital about her wishes.

"We've also talked to her doctor and he's quite agreeable to letting her die."

By what means, I didn't ask. I think by just withdrawing life support. I thought, "Thank Christ it's happening at last and she'll be out of her misery".

A couple of days later I got a phone call from the nursing home saying, "Your mother's back in the nursing home. She's recovered."

I thought, shit. How could that be? I thought this was the end and everything was going to be done to just let her go peacefully. So I went in and saw my mother lying there and she said, "I didn't want to wake up."

She knew what was going on. "I didn't want to wake up." I was really angry and irate and I stomped into the administration office and I said, "You let my mother live." And they said, "It wasn't our fault."

It was just bad luck, that when she went into hospital, her doctor wasn't available. He was on holiday or something, so they got a locum in, acquainted him of all the facts about what her wishes were, but he wouldn't respect them. He persisted in bringing her back to life, because of his religious beliefs. I've never forgiven the church since then, because I know she was sitting there with her faculties about her, thinking, "Oh, what am I doing here? I didn't want to know about this. I didn't want to wake up. I gave Paul those instructions because I didn't want to be revived."

But she was and it condemned her to another six months of misery because she hadn't been let go. All because some doctor with strong religious beliefs would not obey written down instructions from me and from the nursing home. That was pretty powerful.

BWD: *When you say the instructions written down from you, by what authority were your mother's wishes vested through that?*

Paul: I think she made an Advanced Healthcare Directive. This is the bad part about it, in my opinion.

No matter how strongly worded that Healthcare Directive may be, the actual decision is made by a doctor who may or may not have religious beliefs.

In my mother's case, what should have happened when that bloody doctor declined to follow my mother's wishes, the nursing home should have got another doctor. I think that's the mistake they made. For what it's worth, that's one of my personal experiences.

Sandra: Mm-hmm (affirmative). When I had my second hip done, about eighteen months ago, I happened to be in Calvary John James Hospital that particular time, because they're spreading all these operations about.

I'm still a Medicare person, but they were spreading the work around. As I was going in I said to the anaesthetist, "I'm really worried about being here in a Catholic hospital. "Because," I said, "If it looks like I'm going to cark it, then I do want to cark it." I told the anaesthetist, "I've written my wishes out too."

He said, "Well, it all depends on the doctors at the time ... but I'm Church of England anyway, don't worry."

I said, "Well, I hope I don't have to worry." He had a big laugh about it. I said, "I'm 85 years old, and I just don't see any point in going on if my time's up."

[Sandra's daughter Nicola Fairfax joins the conversation.]

BWD: *Okay, so what's the children's take on all of this?*

Nicola: Oh well, I guess every person deals with it a bit differently, and within their relationship. This is the way my mother has dealt with it. She's been talking about her death for some time. About twenty years ago she started to give everything away and made lists of who was to get what. Every now and again she'd bring it up, and us kids were going, "Oh God, not again."

Whatever mum wants, it's absolutely fine. She seems to think there's going to be some big issue about it, but there isn't. It's absolutely fine, and we get to hear about it ...

THE WAY TO GO

regularly. Because it changes slightly every now and again, and so we get to hear about it, but she's very thoughtful and involved about it, and that's absolutely fine.

I think that I'm not going to deal with it until it happens, but I remember, maybe once, I thought of mum dying. I might have had a little tear, but I'm saving up for when she's gone.

BWD: *Paul has a worry that one of the things about allowing voluntary, or encouraged euthanasia, would be that children might bump their parents prematurely in order to get their inheritance.*

Nicola: I wouldn't personally be doing it. I can only comment on what I would personally not do. If she's still bringing in money, I don't really want her to leave just yet. [laughs]

I think my life will be very different with mum not being here, really very, very different. It will really change. We've lived on the same property, and we've had a lot to do with each other — and mum has brought lots of wonderful people into my life. She's been like another dimension of my life. It will be huge.

But I think you see it coming, and I see mum getting more and more frail and starting to do what old people do. Like forgetting things and I think, "God, that's weird, she's doing what old people do". And that's not mum at all, to me. That's not mum.

BWD: *But you won't have any trouble abiding by this piece of paper when the time comes? [the Advanced Healthcare Directive]*

Nicola: Oh yeah. That'll be fine. Absolutely, I would just be thinking of what mum's going through, not what I'm going through at that time.

I saw my dad die, and I really wished that they'd just let him go, the last time when it all went. They started him up again and he had what I consider a pretty awful death. But he was always just interested in doing what the doctors wanted, and what they said, and he didn't want to make decisions for himself.

Paul: So he had an uncomfortable death, did he?

Nicola: I would say it was very uncomfortable I mean, he couldn't communicate much at the end, because he was so dehydrated. He was like a husk, and he was on painkillers, morphine.

He was doped to the eyeballs. I think I'd like to be conscious, lucid, and then to experience my death. I'd want to do that. I don't want it all mucked up with drugs, unless, of course, it's really painful. Then I'd like someone to put me out of my misery.

BWD: *That's exactly what your mum says.*

Nicola: Yeah. But she's assuming that it's going to be painful and awful. That's not necessarily so. She might go in her sleep — just drift off.

Sandra: Basically, when you die, it's something that only you can experience. So it doesn't matter, really, who's there. It's just you. I have to cope with my death. Nobody else. They've got to cope with the result.

BWD: *There's no disagreement between the two of you, I think. You're not in a hurry to die. But what you said is that when it's painful and uncomfortable, you no longer want to live.*

Sandra: That's right. When life is not worth living, that's when I want to die. ■



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