The Think Ahead Project: A public awareness initiative

Authors: Sarah Murphy, Irish Hospice Foundation (email: sarah.murphy@hospice-foundation.ie); Dr. Brendan O'Shea, General Practitioner and Associate Professor of General Practice at Trinity College Dublin

Introduction

Think Ahead is a public awareness initiative of the Forum on End of Life in Ireland. The Forum is guided by the National Council of the Forum on End of Life which was formed in July 2010 and is chaired by Mrs Justice Catherine McGuinness. An extensive year-long public consultation in 2009 identified a wide range of issues which impacted on end of life. The call to the public to ‘think ahead’ is supported by a Think Ahead Form (accessed on www.thinkahead.ie), guiding people in recording important emergency information and in thinking about and then recording their wishes about the care they would and would not like, in the event that they are unable to speak for themselves, due to serious illness, emergency or death.

Aim

To present the development of the Think Ahead project, an Irish public awareness initiative and system to guide people in discussing and recording their preferences.

Methods

A. **Resources** were developed, including:

- **Think Ahead form:** The call to the public to ‘think ahead’ is supported by a Think Ahead Form to guide people in initiating conversations and recording important information and their wishes about their care.
- **Website:** The form can be accessed on www.thinkahead.ie and covers preferences across a number of areas, including care preferences, legal and financial information, and preferences for funeral ceremonies and care after death.

B. A wide range of **consultation processes** were engaged in:

1. **Consultation with the public:** Meetings and focus groups have been held with members of the public across Ireland.
2. **Consultation with stakeholders:** Consultations with stakeholders have been carried out, including medical and legal organisations, NGOs, and government statutory bodies.
3. **GP pilots:** Two GP pilots have been carried out, involving 120 patients up to 70 years of age, which looked at the people’s experiences of filling in the Think Ahead form.
4. **Regional community-based pilots:** Two regional pilots have taken place in two counties, Limerick and Louth, between September and November 2012.

Results

- **Public consultation:**
  - 58% of older and younger respondents in focus groups that they would be interested in availing of a service like Think Ahead, in particular to initiate conversations with family members who may be ill or dying.
- **GP pilots:**
  - Very positive outcomes for both patients GPs were reported. These findings are due to be published in the Irish Medical Journal in early 2013.
- **Regional pilots:**
  - 80% of participants believed that Think Ahead would be of interest to the general public and said that it would encourage people to discuss end of life planning with loved ones; the majority of people said that they found the form and the website easy to use; 52% said that Think Ahead had caused them to rethink their wishes around end of life care.

Discussion

Think Ahead has been very positively received by the public and health professionals who were consulted. The majority of people in all age groups considered Think Ahead to be a welcome initiative, in particular in its capacity to initiate conversations with family members who may be ill or dying. GPs reported that the tool had enhanced their relationship with their patients and reduced the potential for family conflict in relation to a person’s wishes.

Conclusion

Think Ahead is a practical tool which people can use as part of their care planning. In 2013, we are focusing on working with the health system to look at how Think Ahead could be further introduced.

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