

NEWS IN BRIEF

Start planning for death now, teenagers told



A leading right-to-die campaigner has called on 16-year-olds to prepare for their deaths to save loved ones and medical staff from agonising decisions over future care.

Amanda Ward is a fit and healthy mother and wife, who put her own affairs in order three years ago at the age of just 25.

The chief executive of the Glasgow-based group Friends at the End suggests that people across Scotland do the same as soon as they reach adulthood to avoid possible stress and conflict over receiving potentially life-saving treatment if they are ever seriously ill or injured.

The law student, who has already planned her own funeral, believes a crucial part of preparing for death is drafting an advance directive, an official statement sometimes referred to as a living will.

The document allows people to set out their wishes when they are mentally competent on a range of treatments or interventions which they do not want to be given in future. This includes artificial feeding or ventilation to keep them alive if they fall into a permanent vegetative state.

The documentation, is legally binding south of the border where it is known as advance decisions, but campaigners say it remains unclear whether it has the same status under Scottish law — a concern they have previously asked Holyrood to address.

Ms Ward will appear at a Holyrood cross-party committee on end-of-life issues in the autumn.

She said: “I’m 28. I’m married, I’m a mother and I’m happy and healthy but I’m also prepared. I have a funeral plan, a will and an advance directive. It’s the last taboo, and these things become more relevant as you get older and ailments creep in, but you need to be mentally competent to express your wishes and values [through an advance directive] and at any point you could lose that capacity.

“You could be in a car accident and you’d then have to rely on your nearest and dearest, who are dealing with your loss, to make decisions on your behalf.

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“If you already have a statement of your wishes it takes away that ambiguity from your family and medical professionals. I think if there could be some mechanism in place from the age of 16 . . . even to think about it, that would be a good idea.”

She recommended that people reviewed and updated their choices every year, as she does, because medical advances and changing circumstance and opinions could mean their wishes alter.

Ms Ward said debate over failed moves to legalise assisted suicide showed the law was unclear on whether advance directives were legally binding in Scotland.

Professor Celia Kitinger, a psychologist at York University and co-founder of the charity Advance Decisions Assistance, which helps people draft the documents, said that while “not for everyone”, the statements would help those with strong wishes ensure that they are respected.

Making the legal position clear and providing a proper “repository” system for people’s statements was also vital, she said.

Currently people may leave copies with their GP for example, but there is no set system in place, Professor Kitinger added.

The Scottish government said advance directives “carried considerable weight” in law but were not legally binding, which would not change.

If you would like a free initial consultation to discuss your situation and options open to you then contact me Chris Berry at:

Address: Berrys Solicitors
247 Church Street
Blackpool
FY1 3PE
Phone: 01253 620 022
Email: berrys.mail@btconnect.com
Website: <http://www.berrys-solicitors.co.uk>
Solicitor: Christopher Berry Principal

Berrys Solicitors is Authorised and Regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority
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