

Care towards the end of life

Mr Lewis, aged 66 years, moves to a care home following his GP's recommendation. His wife reluctantly agrees to this. He has vascular dementia and has experienced an acute decline with increasing loss of memory, and very severe disabilities. He no longer communicates verbally or follows conversation, and requires help with all areas of personal care. He takes morphine for chronic pain caused by severe osteoarthritis. He has an Advanced Care Plan written 2 years ago signed by him and witnessed by a GP. His wife shows the care home manager and the section where his Advanced Care Plan explicitly states the treatment he does and does not wish to receive to enable him to die with dignity. The Care Plan is not implemented. The senior care worker says that she lacks the authority and the experience to implement an Advanced Care Plan, 'never having seen one', and that it is not a legal Advance Decision under the Mental Capacity Act 2005.. Mrs Lewis is distressed that her husband is offered fluids as she thinks this is prolonging his life unnecessarily, and considers he is in pain. She wants to increase his morphine. The care staff are reluctant to top-up his regularly prescribed morphine with additional doses prescribed on an 'as required' basis by the GP. His wife feels isolated and frustrated that she is unable to fulfil her husband's wishes.

What are the issues of dignity arising here?

- Conflict between family wishes and the care provided
- Non-implementation of an Advanced Care Plan threatening individual's expressed wishes
- Uncertainty on what is optimal palliative care for someone with severe dementia with interventions interpreted differently as 'life sustaining', 'life shortening' or 'palliative'

How would you help in this situation?

- Clearer understanding on how and when to implement and advanced care plan
- Working with Mrs Lewis
- Engaging greater support from primary health care practitioners (e.g. GP, community nurses) to assess and manage Mr Lewis' pain, review his swallowing and discuss how to implement his Advanced Care Plan