



Time to talk about death and dying

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



Time to talk about death and dying

64% of people in the UK think that we do not talk enough about death in this country, yet these conversations can be really helpful in enabling people to receive the end of life care they would want. In order to demystify a natural part of life, and support more people to share their wishes, the NFWI calls upon members to encourage open discussions about death and dying.

Proposer's position

The proposer would like the WI to encourage more open conversations about death and dying in order to help people receive the end of life care they would want, and support family members in making difficult decisions.

The scale of the problem

Death and dying can be very difficult subjects to talk about; according to a 2016 ComRes survey of British adults, 30% of the public say that they are uncomfortable discussing dying with family and friends.

The findings of this research suggest a number of reasons for this including:

- 45% say that talking or thinking about planning their end of life care makes death feel closer;
- 45% say that talking or thinking about the end of their life scares them; and
- 15% believe that talking about death, or making plans such as funeral arrangements, a will or advance care plans, could make death happen.

It also showed that 19% of people would like to make end of life plans, but don't know who among their friends or family they could discuss it with.

Not knowing how to talk to someone else about their end of life wishes is a concern for many people. 15% say they wouldn't know what to say, while a further 15% feel they wouldn't know enough to have an informed discussion. This could help to explain why few adults have asked a family member about their end of life wishes.

The majority of people have also not spoken to anyone about their own end of life care preferences, or written these down.

Talking about death is important because it can help ensure that people receive the end of life care they would want, and die in their place of choosing, giving them a feeling of greater control. However, at the moment this is not the reality for many people. Research commissioned by Macmillan Cancer Support in 2017 found that 64% of people with cancer, for example, would like to die at home yet only 30% currently do.

Knowing your wishes can also make difficult decisions easier for loved ones, and help prepare them practically and emotionally.

Despite this, most people in the UK (64%) feel that we do not talk enough about death in this country, which risks increased feelings of loneliness and sadness.

The current situation in the UK

There are a number of ways that people can make their preferences regarding end of life care known to family members and those involved in their care, and starting a timely and open conversation can be an important first step.

Each year, the benefits of having these conversations are highlighted during ‘Dying Matters Awareness Week’ in May. This is organised by the Dying Matters coalition which includes organisations from across the NHS, and the voluntary and independent health and care sectors including hospices, care homes and charities as well as many others.

The National Palliative and End of Life Care Partnership (made up of organisations such as NHS England and Public Health England), encourages everyone to see it as their responsibility to support each other in times of crisis.

Lots of support is available from charities and the NHS to help people talk about their own feelings about death, and have conversations about end of life with someone who is dying.

These organisations include Macmillan Cancer Support, which has produced a checklist encouraging people to think about their future. Among other things, this suggests considering making a will, writing down your wishes for end of life care and treatment, and thinking about whether you would like to be buried or cremated.

The NHS website offers suggestions on how to start a conversation about dying, and makes recommendations to help make it easier.

Talking about death is not always appropriate though. This could be for cultural reasons (in some cultures it is considered disrespectful to the person who is unwell), or personal preferences (some people only feel comfortable speaking to those closest to them). It might be that some people are not ready to talk about death, and need more time, or would prefer not to have a conversation about it at all.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution was passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, members could raise awareness of the importance of talking about death and dying and the resources available to support people in having these conversations. WIs could also engage with initiatives such as Death Cafes, which provide a space for people to openly discuss this issue.

Nationally, the NFWI could work alongside expert organisations to distribute practical guidance to support WI members in having conversations about death and dying. The barriers that members experience to talking about this subject could also be explored with a view to providing targeted information that would help to overcome these where possible.

While this resolution would enable members to discuss a range of issues around death and dying, it would not allow the WI to campaign on assisted dying. The NFWI is unable to campaign for a change in the law to legalise assisted dying as this would be outside our charitable objects and so would contravene charity law.

Arguments for the resolution

- WI members could make a difference on this issue by creating environments in which people can talk about death and dying if they wish to, and to learn about end of life care and the support available to families.
- Several resolutions were submitted this year on the subject of death and dying, which shows the strength of feeling about this issue amongst members.

Arguments against the resolution

- The Dying Matters coalition, as well as charities like Macmillan Cancer Support, Cancer Research UK, and the NHS, already encourage people to think about their future and talk about death and dying. Is there more the WI could add?
- This is a sensitive subject, which not all members may wish to engage with.

Further information

Age UK: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/booklets/talking_about_death_booklet_final_version.pdf

Macmillan Cancer Support: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/lets-talk-about-death>

NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/end-of-life-care/>

Dying Matters: <https://www.dyingmatters.org/>

Video content

This video from Age UK highlights the importance of talking about death and dying:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Bfomd2mq7w>

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

Post: National Federation of Women's Institutes, 104 New Kings Road, London, SW6 4LY

Telephone: 020 7371 9300

Email: publicaffairs@nfwl.org.uk

Website: thewi.org.uk