

Problem of age: elderly forget dying wishes

What the elderly want in terms of end-of-life treatment may significantly vary from instructions left in their wills. This is thanks to false memories, says a new study.

The study by University of Victoria researchers found that while 'living wills' remind people of their right to update the documents if their wishes change, this assumes that people recognise their wishes have changed and remember that their current wishes are different from those documented in their wills.

Findings of the study, which involved 400 adults above the age of 65, have been published in the latest issue of the journal *Health Psychology*.

The participants were interviewed about which life-sustaining treatments they would want if they were seriously ill, and were interviewed again 12 months later to test their recall of earlier decisions.

About one-third of participants changed their wishes regarding medical treatment over the course of the year. In 75 percent of these cases, participants falsely remembered that their original views on the issues matched their new ones.

Interviewers also talked to people with the authority to make medical decisions on behalf of the study subjects if they were no longer able to.

The study found these potential surrogate decision-makers were even less sensitive to changes in their loved one's wishes, showing false memories in 86 percent of cases.

The study recommends that living wills have an expiry date that would prompt a review of end-of-life treatment directives.

It also stressed the importance of maintaining an ongoing dialogue among patients, their families and their physicians about end-of-life treatment options.

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