

Act Before It's Too Late: Explore End-of-Life People's Last Wishes **Ms Zhang Lingling, Project Officer**

[A recent news reported](#) the story of Mr. Ng, who is a 75-year-old elderly man passing away before an arranged outdoor visit to fulfill his last wishes. Mr. Ng had been living in a local elderly home for years. After falling onto the floor and hurting his neck accidentally 3 years ago, the lonely old man had never gotten a chance to go outside of the elderly home for refreshment. One volunteer had arranged Mr. Ng a visit to Kowloon Park in mid-October to enjoy some fresh air and to memorize his good old days. Unfortunately, Mr. Ng passed away on 17 October, days before the scheduled outing date. The story is sad but it highlighted the importance of knowing and fulfilling the last wishes of people in their end-of-life (EoL) people before it is too late.

Simple but Priceless Wishes

The story of Mr. Ng might have been very different if there had been someone who asked Mr. Ng about his wishes earlier. Studies have found that asking EoL people to list their last wishes and assist them to realize the wishes help them pass away peacefully and relieve sense of regret.

An Italian study published in March 2016 found that an early exploration of EoL needs and wishes is necessary to improve individual care. They reported that wishes of patients in their last week of life can be as simple as engaging in small everyday life activities. Another group of researchers in Canada carried out a “3 Wishes Project” study. They collected at least three wishes from each of the 40 palliative patients who have chosen to withdraw advanced life support. A total of 163 wishes were collected from patients, their families, or clinicians. These wishes could be classified into five categories:

- Humanizing the environment;
- Personal tributes (such as having a tea party or planting a tree in the patient's name);
- Family reconnection;
- Rituals and observances (such as blessing or renewal of wedding vows);
- “Paying it forward” (such as organ donation or contribution to charity).

Fulfilling those seemingly simple wishes can be invaluable experiences for EoL patients, their families and the care team. All together 159 wishes were fulfilled and participants reported positive outcomes, including encouraging individualized end of life care, guiding other people to honor the patient, helping family to create positive memories, promoting inter-professional care for clinicians and exemplifying humanism in practice.

Explore Last Wishes

Exploring wishes are never easy, especially when patients and family members are approaching EoL. Sometimes people are not clear about their wishes, and the other times people do not know how to articulate. There are different tools people use to facilitate EoL patients in articulating their wishes without causing extra distress. One of these tools is the Go Wish card game was developed by the Coda Alliance. It is a set of 36 cards designed to allow patients to identify and prioritize their last wishes.



Recently, American and Chilean researchers conducted a randomized controlled trial to assess the last wishes of 100 patients, with an aim to compare patients' preference between the Go Wish card game and List of wishes/statements containing the same number of items. The study found whether patients were exposed to the card game or List of wishes/statements, the findings were very consistent and it is very reassuring that either of these forms could be used according to the patient's preferences.

The ten most common wishes identified as very important by patients were: to be at peace with God; to pray; and to have family present; to be free from pain; not being a burden to my family; to trust my doctor; to keep my sense of humor; to say goodbye to important people in my life; to have my family prepared for my death; and to be able to help others.

The Go Wish card game did not increase anxiety when discussing wishes. This tool was found to be particularly useful among elderly people with limited ability in expressing themselves, such as those with mild dementia, or low literacy level. When it comes to EoL, patients and family members may not know how to express themselves. The use of tools such as card games would facilitate open and genuine communications over last wishes, and help to create happy memories before it is too late.