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Doctor at Portsmouth forum: Discussion on end-of-life care needed

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PORTSMOUTH — For some, old age or disability are a present reality. For others, they are something to avoid thinking or talking about. For many families caring for elderly parents, or someone with a disability, it is often a daily struggle.

Dr. Ira Byock thinks the conversation about reclaiming the end of life and making it a comfortable, even enjoyable period is long overdue.

Byock, Director of Palliative Medicine at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, is trying to facilitate a national conversation on end of life issues, including the improvement of life for the frail and disabled, and their caregivers.

His targets are presidential candidates.

"The elderly and family caregivers simply don't have a voice that the body politic can hear ... their pleadings are barely whispers," Byock said during an interview Saturday.

To get things rolling, Byock is touring the state gathering input from families currently dealing with the issues and will visit Portsmouth's North Church on Wednesday at 6:30 p.m.

"We know better options are available, but currently nobody is talking about it; nobody in Congress, in (our) bureaucracy or the Executive Branch is talking about these issues," Byock said.

The Reclaiming the End of Life Initiative is a nonprofit, nonpartisan project formed to use the New Hampshire primaries and the national spotlight they command to engage candidates in a national conversation about how they plan to address the unmet needs of this large and increasing population of older and disabled Americans.

Byock has been involved in hospice and palliative, or pain management, care since his residency in 1978.



Dr. Ira Byock Director of Palliative Medicine at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center

In the three forums facilitated elsewhere in the state, Byock said that people have said they want to be at home during the end of their lives. No one wants to spend their last days in a nursing home or a hospital.

Currently, 50 to 60 percent of Americans die in hospitals and 25 to 30 percent die in nursing homes, according to the Society of Critical Care Medicine.

"This is one national crisis we can fix," Byock said.

And it is an issue that affects, or will affect everyone, he added.

Byock said people also want their pain managed expertly and think medical students and nursing students should have required courses in pain management, communication, geriatrics, hospice and palliative care.

But Byock said the issue is much larger than health care, and model programs already exist as examples of how things can be better.

"This isn't just about health care. It is about transportation, making meals, getting dressed, boredom and isolation. There are a lot of things our policy-makers and even the next President can do in addition to health care," Byock said.

He added that these services need to be delivered in a highly personalized fashion and are affordable.

"We all pay for it one way or another. There is a common fallacy that if you're talking about something better, obviously we won't be able to afford it. We (Americans) already spend two to three times the amount of money on the last years of life than are spent in any other Western highly developed country," Byock said.

For more information on the Reclaiming the End of Life Initiative visit www.ReclaimTheEnd.org .