



Why talking about dying matters



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There are several conversations in life that are inherently difficult. Talking about the end of your life and confronting your mortality when faced with a terminal diagnosis is likely to be at the top of the list. On Oct 19, the UK's Royal College of Physicians published the report: *Talking about dying: How to begin honest conversations about what lies ahead*. Based on extensive consultations with doctors, patients, and health-care professionals, the report highlights that physicians need to initiate honest conversations with their patients about their future care and treatment much earlier than after diagnosis of a progressive or terminal condition, including frailty. Furthermore, these conversations should be conducted with compassion and respect.

The report identified reasons for why physicians found conversations about dying difficult. Physicians viewed death as a failure when modern medicine is supposed to be a panacea for all illnesses. Doctors did not feel confident and lacked knowledge and skills to initiate conversations and handle diagnostic uncertainty. Confusion exists over who should be having the conversations across the continuum

of care, and given workforce and system pressures, time to have these conversations are just not prioritised. However, the evidence shows patients and their families welcome these conversations. Having end-of-life care plans in place empowers them about their care and decision making, and to ultimately be in control of their lives.

As more people live longer with one or more long-term conditions, the report recommends that conversations between health-care professionals and patients occur across the continuum of care. Conversation training needs of all health-care professionals (not just palliative care doctors) must be met, and the public should be made aware that they are entitled to these conversations. An important step would be for advanced care planning around death and dying to feature prominently in the upcoming National Health Service 10-year plan. A better death means more dignity, more symptom control, and more choice on how to die and where to die, and gives bereaved families a better experience of death. To avoid talking about dying jeopardises these benefits. ■ *The Lancet*

For the Royal College of Physicians' report see <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/outputs/talking-about-dying-how-begin-honest-conversations-about-what-lies-ahead>



Doctors and scientists must defend a free press



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Nov 2 marks the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. UNESCO has recorded 1010 killings of journalists in the past 12 years. In 90% of cases, the killers went unpunished. The work of journalists worldwide offers a vital platform to discuss and debate the health and wellbeing of populations whose plight might otherwise never come to international attention.

Death is not the only way journalists are silenced—they are regularly intimidated and detained as well. Already this year, *The Lancet* has condemned Shahidul Alam's detention for highlighting the Government of Bangladesh's failure to ensure road safety for its citizens. 2018 has also seen Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo of Reuters convicted after reporting on the alleged killings of ten Rohingya at the hands of soldiers and Buddhist villagers in Myanmar. Journalists risk their personal safety because highlighting health and human rights atrocities is so important.

Press freedom around the world is currently at its lowest ebb for 13 years. 2017 saw 73 000 people

classify themselves as journalists or editors, down from 84 000 just 1 year previously. Only 13% of the world's population currently has a free press. Free press and free expression are inextricably linked to the struggle to advance health for individuals and populations. As we can see from the recent scrambles by Russia and Saudi Arabia to invent narratives to explain their illegal actions, it is only wider attention that can bring sufficient pressure on governments to act within the law and respect the health and human rights of its citizens. Journalists offer a key avenue for applying this pressure.

Let Nov 2, this year, mark a change in the way we think of journalists. It is not just the job of press colleagues, lawyers, and governments to defend the rights of journalists worldwide—health professionals and scientists must stand up for a free press too. If we hope for the better health of people worldwide, we must defend the rights of the most objective international monitoring mechanism we have—a free press. ■ *The Lancet*

For more about International Day to End Impunity see <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/endimpunity>
See Editorial *Lancet* 2018; 392: 531

For more about Shahidul Alam see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/06/famed-bangladeshi-photographer-held-over-road-protest-comments>

For press freedom statistics see <https://rightsinfo.org/here-are-the-worrying-figures-about-our-press-freedom-in-2018/>