

Why planning your life makes sense

If you knew when you're going to die you could plan your life accordingly, my father used to say. As children, we laughed at such an outrageous idea. Why would he want even to think about death?

I'm starting to get it, now I'm older than he was when he uttered such a memorable statement. In fact, he could have done a plan, because he was certain he would die at the same age his father did, 84...and he did. We later found out Granddad lived till he was 85, so Dad cheated himself out of a year.

What would his plan have said, I wonder? I've got a good idea about that because of the growth of an important social trend – the advance care plan. One is coming to your town soon, care of the area health board, whose website is expected to open a portal to advance care planning at the end of this month.

There's one available already on the national <http://www.advancecareplanning.org.nz/> website, thanks to a Ministry of Health initiative launched at the start of this decade. However, it's a long and complex process and doesn't seem to have an online form you can fill out with a keyboard. You need to print it and write it out long-hand, which is a bit clunky for the increasing number of people who are computer-enabled.

The Taranaki one – developed by a trio of Taranaki health board/Hospice Taranaki medical professionals – will be online-friendly and able to be stored electronically by your GP, health care centre, the base hospital, hospice, your lawyer, the person with enduring power of attorney over your affairs, family, friends, or anyone you want.

Before we look at what's involved, cast your mind back to the 1980s – if you're old enough – and recall the arrival of strategic planning in New Zealand business circles. I was editor of the Auckland Star at the time our owners, Brierley Investments, put a new-generation general manager into our company and he introduced us to strategic planning.

It seemed incomprehensible. Up to that point, most if not all companies (and government departments) did what they did without the aid of fancy plans, and budgeted by the crude but until then effective means of simply adding the annual rate of inflation to last year's budget and getting on with business.

This new way involved teams within our newspaper operation spending hours poring over guiding documents that spoke of threats and opportunities and strategies, and budgets linked to actual projected aims and targets. It took weeks to produce a massive document that most of us quietly filed away in bottom drawers and never consulted again.

However, strategic planning was here to stay, because some genius introduced the idea to government bureaucrats and, well, we all know where that went. They took to strategic planning as an alcoholic to hard liquor.

What surprised me, however, is that nobody I know has ever taken this approach to their own lives. When you think about it, if proper detailed planning supposedly works so well for government and business, why don't we all use it to sort ourselves out?

Well - and it may be unwise to confess this (it's like admitting you wear singlets) – our household has just gone down the strategic planning track. It was a matter of necessity. We have just spent 15 months renovating, and our lives have been chaotic - physically, emotionally and, most crucially, in the finance department.

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That period has just ended, so now seemed a good time to reevaluate our life...and our budget. We've done a life plan. It includes a budget, and advance care plans, which will be done again with the new Taranaki version, which looks eminently more practical and easily managed.

We've optimistically assumed we'll live another 15 to 20 years, so the life plan will be done in five year spurts (much as communist Russia did them), with annual reviews to see how the budget spreadsheet pans out, and as our priorities, opportunities, capabilities and abilities change with age.

We've allowed for disasters, of course. And that's where the advance care plan comes in. What happens if one of us ends up being carted off to A and E at 3am one day, comatose and unable to speak our wishes to medics? Will we want \$1400-a-night intensive care, tubes, dialysis?

If you want to know more about advance care planning, check the health board website:

<http://www.tdhb.org.nz/> after March 29, or email Claudia.matthews@tdhb.org.nz