

Katie Johnson: Good morning, and welcome to Apple A Day, Lake Region Healthcare's Health and Wellness segment here on Lakes Radio. This is Katie Johnson, and joining me as my guests today are Deb Forstner, chaplain at Lake Region Healthcare, and on the phone as a special guest today, we have another Deb, Deborah Laxson. She is an author and is a speaker coming to Fergus Falls to talk about her book and her experience as a healthcare agent. Her presentation is entitled Preparing Healthcare Agents for Their Role.

Good morning, Deb and Deb.

Deb Forstner: Good morning, Katie.

Deborah Laxson: Good morning.

Katie Johnson: Deb Forstner, let's start with you. Can you just share with our listeners a little bit of background about the work that has been ongoing on this topic of advanced care planning and how and why you invited Deb Laxson to come to Fergus Falls.

Deb Forstner: Yes, sure. Lake Region has very much made it a priority to educate people about healthcare directives. We want to be able to listen to what people value and what they want, and if they couldn't speak for themselves, we want to be able to listen to their designated healthcare agents. I had gone to a workshop this past July that Honoring Choices Minnesota had put on, a statewide conference, and it was there that I heard Deb Laxson speak.

I was so touched by her talk and saw it as something that would really benefit Fergus Falls and our surrounding communities. She had mentioned that in April, there is a Healthcare Decisions Day nationally and that someday she hoped that in November there would be a Healthcare Agents Day. When I approached her, I said, "I think we could do a Healthcare Agents Day for you in November in Fergus Falls if you're willing to come," and she said, "Yes."

Katie Johnson: Fantastic. Deb Laxson, I mentioned in the introduction you have a very personal story surrounding the role of being a healthcare agent. Could you share briefly about that and what led to writing your book, *The Gray Zone*?

Deborah Laxson: Sure. Again, I want to thank the community for this opportunity to come up. I wrote the book, *The Gray Zone, When Life Support No Longer Supports Life*, because I was totally blindsided by the emotional impact of being a loved one's healthcare agent and having to make end-of-life decisions. My late husband, Bill, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2008, and we had been in and out of the hospital several times over a couple of years. The last time that we went to the hospital I was expecting a routine get in, get out, and go home and life would be fine.

He continued to decline, however, and I found myself with him in the intensive care

unit, and he was in a medically-induced coma. It was several days into the event before I realized that I needed to function as his healthcare agent. I was still his wife, but being his healthcare agent had to supersede being his wife, so rather than making the decisions I wanted to make, I needed to make the decisions he would have made if he were not in a coma.

That was an event that was life-defining for me, and because I had been so totally unprepared and as I talked to other people about it, it became clear that the majority of people that I knew would have also been unprepared. I wrote the book to start conversations and invite people into my story so they could talk about what they needed to talk about.

Katie Johnson: It sounds to me like you certainly had the time and the conversations intellectually to plan for being the healthcare agent, and yet you still were blindsided by it. I think that's very enlightening.

Deborah Laxson: That's absolutely true. The entire exercise, it truly was an intellectual exercise, "Yes, I'll be your healthcare agent. I'm your wife. Who else would you have do this?" but then having to step back and realize this is not about me. It's not about my decision. It's not about what I want. It truly is about what Bill wanted and the decisions that he would have made and the decisions that he told me he wanted made if he could not speak.

Katie Johnson: Right. Your sessions here are going to be on November 14 and 15, and as I mentioned, are focused on helping healthcare agents prepare for their role. Can you give us just a preview of what kind of advice you will be offering to those who attend?

Deborah Laxson: Ironically, preparing the healthcare agent for their role really starts with the patient and the patient being clear on what's important to them and what's not important to them and asking someone to be their healthcare agent, not doing the paperwork and then not telling anyone about it, telling stories. Then for the healthcare agent, don't assume that you know what someone means when they say they don't want to be a burden.

It's time to ask clarifying questions, "Mom, you said you don't want to be a burden. Well, what exactly is a burden in your mind, in your definition?" because otherwise, we inject what we think it means, so taking the time to ask those clarifying questions. For the medical professionals, make sure that they understand who the healthcare agent is and what the patient's wishes are so that they could help guide the decisions from the information about what the patient views as important or not.

Katie Johnson: That's great advice, and I'm sure you have a lot more to add to that at the sessions. Who in your mind is the ideal audience member? Who should attend these public sessions?

Deborah Laxson: To me, anyone who is over the age of eighteen is someone who should have a healthcare directive. We spend a lot of time talking about the terminally ill or the person who is aging, but really, if you're over eighteen and healthy and you have a sudden medical event like a car crash or you fall, you will most likely live longer with a decision that someone makes on your behalf. When you talk about healthcare directives to someone who is thirty and perfectly healthy, a lot of times they feel they don't need to be included, and yet, they do.

Katie Johnson: They do, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deborah Laxson: Anyone over the age of eighteen.

Katie Johnson: You're also offering these sessions for medical staff, some additional sessions, I should say, for medical staff, for nurses and social workers, and you have a really targeted message just for them, too.

Deborah Laxson: It's interesting to me how you can take four people and put them in a room and they're in the same physical space, and yet we have a totally different conversation going on in our heads and we interpret the information differently. Without the medical experience or training, I didn't realize my late husband was on life support for several days, and so the conversation with a medical professional is really just because my head is nodding doesn't mean that I've understood it the way you intended.

Katie Johnson: Sure. What a valuable lesson for them as well. Deb Forstner, could you recap for us. I've mentioned there are public sessions. There are sessions for medical staff and for social workers. Recap where the sessions are, when they are, and where they'll be held.

Deb Forstner: The first community session is going to be Monday, November 14, at 7:00pm at the YMCA in Fergus Falls, and that will be about an hour, 7:00 to 8:00pm. Deb will be there as well as one of our medical staff. Dr. Money will be there in case any medical questions come up that we as not medical people couldn't answer.

Then again in the morning, same place, YMCA Community Room, but on November 15 at 9:00am. Deb will go over the same information again. If you prefer our evening session or a morning session for anybody, all are welcome. Both of those are offered, and then-

Katie Johnson: Oh, go ahead.

Deb Forstner: Oh, yeah. In addition, at Lake Region itself, we're having a noon luncheon for our physicians or providers. If somebody is hearing this and is interested in that, I want them to contact me. The same goes in the afternoon at Lake Region in our conference rooms on our lower level. We'll have continuing education for nurses and social workers from 3:30 to 4:30 on November 15.

Katie Johnson: Really wide-reaching message about this very important topic of preparing healthcare agents for their role. Anything else either of you would like our listeners to know before we wrap up today?

Deb Forstner: I would like to start by really making a special thank you to Lake Region Foundation, because they're the ones that have donated the money through a grant application for sponsoring this educational opportunity for us. Then also to say that Honoring Choices Minnesota, who sponsored that workshop where I first met Deb, has a very clever saying for November. They're encouraging people that it's time to talk turkey and carve out time for advanced care planning conversations.

Katie Johnson: Mmm.

Deb Forstner: I'm thinking coming November 14 or 15, again open to all our community, not just Fergus Falls. All our surrounding area is welcome to come, and it might give you some better questions and better conversation starters with family gathering together.

Katie Johnson: Right. With that Thanksgiving holiday coming up the following week, you'll be able to definitely talk turkey if you can carve out some time for that. Deb Laxson, any last messages that you'd like to share?

Deborah Laxson: I would also like to say thank you to Lake Region and the Fergus Falls area. It is such an honor and a privilege to witness such community involvement and engagement around advance care planning. Again, thank you for this opportunity.

Katie Johnson: We look forward to having you in Fergus Falls. Deborah Laxson will be our special speaker on preparing healthcare agents for their role Monday, November 14, at 7:00pm and Tuesday, November 15, at 9:00am at the Fergus Falls YMCA Community Room.

Deb Forstner, our chaplain at Lake Region Healthcare, thank you for coordinating this. Deb Laxson, we look forward to welcoming you to Fergus Falls. Thank you both for being my guests this morning.

Deb Forstner: Thank you, Katie.

Deborah Laxson: Thank you.

Katie Johnson: Deb Forstner, Deb Laxson, and Katie Johnson here on Apple A Day reminding you that there is so much to do here. Stay healthy for it. Have a great day.