



End of life doula Estella Hutchinson helps to take the uncertainty out of the final chapters of life. Photo: Jordan Mirchevski.

A guiding hand at the end, Estella is an end of life doula

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When preparing to welcome a new life, we know the steps we have to take: doctor visits, birth plans, and setting up nurseries. However, the opposite is true when we approach the time that we must depart. Helping to navigate the tricky, often difficult times are end of life doulas like Estella Hutchinson.

Just one piece of the puzzle, an end of life doula is a non-clinical, non-legal member of what should be a multi-disciplinary team. Estella says her role is to support individuals and families with end of life matters. This includes pre-planning advanced care plans, developing funeral plans, and what support they might need.

“When you get a medical diagnosis, you’re going to have this whole medical team behind you. You’re going to see doctors, from your GP through to surgeons, that you may only see briefly, but a doula can offer that continuity of care all the way through and be a support person for you and your family,” says Estella.

Estella can be there for the active dying phase and assist with after-death body care, however not working to a strict schedule, it is different for each client.

"Any of us could die at any time, so you don't necessarily have a clear indication... But when it's coming to the pointy end and their doctors or palliative care physicians are saying we're getting a bit closer, that's when you start looking at what needs to be put in place," she says.

A celebrant, Estella can conduct the funeral service, she is also a grief counsellor who can be there for family members in the aftermath.

"A grief counsellor is about being comfortable sitting in that muck and so many people think they have got to get over it or fix themselves, but it is about sitting and feeling the grief and the loss before moving into a new life."

Previously an operation manager at a wholesaling company, Estella studied to be a doula in 2016. Always comfortable around death, she volunteered in palliative care for several years and is the person in her social groups people go to for advice, it was a natural progression.

"It is a role of being in service, being there for that person and their family and hoping that you have been able to provide their preferred death and things that they want in that space," she says.

Estella sees on average 10 clients across the year, usually between 40-60 years old. Some have received a diagnosis of a life-limiting disease, while others are seeking out some help with planning at the insistence of their children. She may not see a client again for another five years, others she is in regular contact with throughout the whole journey.

"I might work with families for years through an illness journey."

Also known as a death doula, Estella says that title didn't sit comfortably with her, it makes people recoil and she is there for so much more than just the death. Many clients come to her not long after their diagnosis to start the process.

"A lot of people don't register as soon as you get a diagnosis you start grieving, you might have five or 10 years, that grief process starts straightaway for the individual and their family."

The initial meeting starts with getting comfortable with each other, going over legal and medical options and whether the client would like Estella's help or that of trusted members in those fields. She says her role is to guide people and help broaden their knowledge of the wealth of options available.

While a doctor might want to focus on a cure, treatment or making someone comfortable, Estella will look at where you are right now and what you need and want. She says many people can feel isolated in their end of life journey, even with family around, as there are always things they can't talk about with family.

"Particularly if the family has taken a 'we're going to fight this illness, we're going to beat it' approach, the person with the condition might not share that mindset," she says. "Having a safe person they can talk to about their feelings or explore those emotions is very important."

The population is ageing, Estella says in the next 20-30 years our health system is not going to be able to cope, so we need more skilled people comfortable working in spaces around death. She says over the years we have become uncomfortable with the topic of death, gone are the days when multigenerational homes would have a grandparent nearing the end of their life with the family.

“When we started hospitalising death it became an unknown, people weren’t familiar with it anymore. Few people have seen a dead body now, whereas 100 years ago, you would have seen at least one or two along the way,” she says. “Death became medicalised and doctors took over. It also got this ‘it’s the enemy’ feel to it. Just that mystery around what happens, the fear and people go to the hospital to die, it’s a scary place.”

Having difficult conversations now can save trouble and uncertainty later. Estella says we need to ask ourselves whether it’s fair to leave our children, partner, or family to make decisions for us when we had the opportunity to make our wants known.

“It comes down to two sides: how would you feel having to make those decisions with nothing and how are you going to feel if they do something that is completely not what you would have wanted.”

She also believes that it isn’t just people who are aware of the limitations of their lives that should be looking into end of life options.

“Advanced care planning and creating funeral plans, everyone should think about that once they’re 18. It’s not just a diagnosis thing, or you’re getting old thing. We all need to put some thought into that.”

Find out more about Estella and her end of life services; yoursunset.com.au