

The Word Cloud: A Visual Legacy of a Loved One's Life

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Objective:

We developed the 3 Wishes Project to elicit and implement wishes for dying critically ill patients, to nurture peace, and ease the grieving process. Wishes may be those of patients, families or clinicians. One wish frequently offered is a Word Cloud - a word collage describing a patient's character, roles, relationships, values and virtues. Our objective was to understand the impact of Word Clouds from the perspective of families and clinicians.

Methods:

We used field note reflections of 7 project members participating in Word Cloud creation and qualitative content analysis of relevant data from 208 interviews (58 family members of dying patients and 150 clinicians).

Results:

Word Clouds were composed of words assembled by clinicians either directly talking with families and patients or indirectly based on their knowledge of the patient, or words compiled by families themselves. The process of families and friends generating words often invokes cathartic story-telling as shared memories acknowledge the laughter, love and loss that are part of life. Clinicians report how assembling words facilitates connections with patients and families. The creator selects the colour palette, word importance is reflected in font size and layout is computer-generated. Word Clouds are offered to families antemortem or postmortem in hard-copy (framed or unframed) or electronically. Reportedly treasured keepsakes, Word Clouds are displayed in the hospital room or at a funeral service, hung at home publically or privately in a place of prayer, posted on Facebook, or seconded with other mementos.

Conclusions:

In the 3 Wishes Project, Word Clouds are indispensable tools that help families and clinicians honour a dying patient. As a form of art, Word Clouds can help to make meaning, reminisce in a ritual, and leave a legacy of a loved one. Documenting and displaying words to remember someone in death reaffirms their life.