

South Africa's first online living-will service launches to support financial planning

Digital living-will start-up, Swansong, has recently launched in order to make the difficult conversations about illness, facing death, and planning a good life to the end easier, and more financially efficient.



Source: unSplash.

First-to-market in South Africa, Swansong offers virtual, guided end-of-life conversations and planning with expert counsellors. Over two one-hour online video sessions, a counsellor helps a client discover, clarify and communicate what is important to them towards the end of their life, documenting all of it into a living will or advance care plan.

The Swansong Advance Care Plan is legally sound, and contains the client's decisions around future medical care (the treatment they are prepared to receive and where they want to die - hospital, hospice or home), and the nomination of their healthcare proxy (someone who can legally make healthcare decisions on the client's behalf if they can't).

It's a comprehensive, personalised guide that protects existing financial plans from panicked end-of-life decisions that waste financial resources. It can assist financial planners, the client and family members.

Swansong is the brainchild of South African women, Dr Linda Holding, a palliative-trained doctor with 20 years of clinical risk-management experience, and Shivani Ranchod, a healthcare actuary and academic.

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“The recent Covid pandemic has shown us that being prepared for your death is more than simply having a will in place which details how your finances and property will be split up,” says Holding.

“One of the most valuable gifts you can offer to those you love is to embrace your mortality and be specific about the care you do or do not want to receive, and how you would prefer to die. As with financial planning, by planning your end-of-life wishes ahead, you'll unburden your family from making tough decisions when the time comes someday.

“In financial services, it's usual to start at the end of life, so we know that having a will is critical. For financial planners the will can be a useful centrepiece around which to arrange your client's financial plan. But what about a living will?

“Organising a living will – or advance care plan – for their client means that their financial plan has the best chance of playing out as they planned and hoped. A carefully-prepared advance care plan can protect the client's financial plans from unintended, non-beneficial end-of-life decisions, expensive treatments and often excessive suffering.”



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By partnering with Swansong, some of the financial planner's more difficult conversations about serious illness, facing death and end-of-life plans can be handled by specialists. With a Swansong Advance Care Plan in place, financial advice and financial plans are protected, and even more importantly: clients have a voice to the end, and it offers enormous relief to family members, to know they are following the wishes of their loved one.

Swansong project lead, Janine Rauch, says that international studies show that 92% of us say that talking about our end-of-life values is important, yet only 32% of us have actually done so. “It's a challenging topic to contemplate, let alone plan and discuss,” says Rauch.

“Working through and documenting an advance care plan with Swansong now, whatever your age and health status, is a good idea – it's never too early. Accidents happen. Illness and surgeries increase our risk of needing an advance care plan.

“Swansong wants to help everyone think about, talk about and document their wishes for care through the end of life, so that those wishes can be understood and respected. If financial planners build Swansong into their practice, their clients will have a fully comprehensive plan,” says Rauch.

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