

Alexei Sayle confronts attitudes towards terminal illness and society's last taboo

Comedian Alexei Sayle confronts attitudes towards terminal illness and society's last taboo in the film Last Laugh – as Dying Awareness Week launches 14-20 May (www.dyingmatters.org)

A new film featuring the indomitable Alexei Sayle reflects on the reality of dying and the value of humour in helping people hold on to a sense of humanity, normality and control over their lives in the midst of terminal illness.

In 'Last Laugh', Alexei Sayle talks to four people, whose life expectancy is less than a year, and discovers how humour not only helps them to manage their illness, but breaks down the isolation and frustration they feel when professionals, friends and even family treat them as too fragile for life.

The six minute film has been commissioned for the national Dying Matters Awareness Week, 14-20 May to encourage people to talk more openly about dying and bereavement, and to help educate health professionals involved in end of life care. The film will be available to view online at www.dyingmatters.org from 14 May 2012.

"Last Laugh" was made by PictureWise Productions with the active support and advice of Bolton NHS Foundation Trust, Bolton Hospice and St Ann's Hospice in Manchester.

As well as producing the film, Manchester based documentary maker Kathleen LaCamera is personally involved in supporting people with terminal illness, in her part-time role as health care chaplain for the Royal Bolton Hospital and Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust.

She says, "Whether I'm on a hospital ward or out in the community, what people tell me over and over is that they don't want others to become overly cautious around them or simply avoid them for fear of saying the wrong thing because they are dying. What they do want is to do the things they've always done for as long as they can: talk to friends and family, complain about what's bugging them, laugh at a good joke, feel useful, get the help they need on a bad day and most of all connect with those things that have always made them feel most like themselves. As a healthcare chaplain it is a privilege to be supporting and learning from people at this time of their lives."

National Dying Matters awareness week is organised by the Dying Matters Coalition, which was set up in 2009 by the National Council for Palliative Care to help ensure people get their end of life wishes met. Many of the 16,000 members of Dying Matters, including charities, care homes, hospitals, GPs, hospices, funeral directors and members of the legal and financial professions will be holding events and activities during the week, aimed at encouraging people to talk about end of life issues.

Eve Richardson, Chief Executive of the National Council for Palliative Care and the Dying Matters Coalition said:

“Every minute someone in England dies, but many people still feel uncomfortable talking about end of life issues. We are urging everyone to visit www.dyingmatters.org to get help and support in broaching those difficult conversations about dying, death and bereavement.

“Talking about dying is in everyone’s interests as it can help ensure that all of us can get the care and support we want, where we want it at the end of our lives.

“As a film, ‘Last Laugh’ is tremendously important because it helps to break down the stigma and isolation that many people feel when diagnosed with a terminal illness.

“Dying Matters Awareness Week, with its wide range of events and activities across England, promises to be a great opportunity to encourage people to become more confident in talking about dying and to take small actions to plan for the future.”

Notes to editors:

The 2012 Dying Matters Awareness Week takes place 14-20 May. Media resources include:

- The Last Laugh film – previews available on request
- 2012 Com Res survey for the Dying Matters Coalition into the attitudes of the general public and GP’s towards dying, with regional statistics available under embargo for the 14 May
- Details of the winners of the first ever creative writing competition to take death as its subject
- A new photographic exhibition capturing the small actions which make a powerful difference to those people at the end of life
- Donations to Dying Matters can be made by visiting www.dyingmatters.org
- Follow Dyingmatters on twitter and tweet using #DyingMatters

For more information about the Dying Matters awareness week including available spokespeople and case studies, please contact Hilary Nathan Tel: 0789 013 7074 email: h.nathan@ncpc.org.uk and Joe Levenson on 020 7697 1531/07795 158003 email: j.leveson@ncpc or the Dying Matters team on 0800 021 4466. www.dyingmatters.org

PictureWise Productions is an award-winning Manchester-based independent production company founded by former BBC TV Executive, Chris Loughlin and journalist Kathleen LaCamera, whose experience also includes hospital and mental health chaplaincy. PictureWise has long experience in producing documentary, news and popular programming that explores sensitive and difficult subjects for both general and specialist audiences.

