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Former Nurse and Physician Assistant Authors Book on Taboo Topic: How to Live Your Values and Die Peacefully

“Finish Strong” Tells How to Take Charge of Your End-of-Life Care and Avoid Needless Suffering

(Portland, Ore. - Jan. 8, 2018) An ER and ICU nurse and physician assistant for 25 years, Barbara Coombs Lee has written a critically acclaimed, groundbreaking book about the taboo topic of how to live strong to the end. Titled Finish Strong: Putting YOUR Priorities First at Life’s End, the book is based on her decades as a clinician, caring for dying patients who suffered needlessly, and decades more as an advocate, empowering people to avoid that fate. Its recommendations come with both the authority of knowledge and experience, and the compassion of one who knows firsthand how challenging the end-of-life journey can be. Finish Strong is available for purchase now on Amazon at bit.ly/BuyFinishStrongBook.

“As baby boomers moved through significant life stages, we changed every one. Dying will be no different,” writes Coombs Lee, a baby boomer herself, born in 1947. “This book … promotes a brave new model of medical decision-making. It supports candor, curiosity and individual agency. It offers alternatives to the conveyor-belt approach of automatic, futile and burdensome overtreatment … Americans’ blind faith in medical authority … is about to undergo a sea change. The purpose of this book is to help people navigate and implement that change.”

The usual advice about advance directives and conversations is important but woefully inadequate. This book describes concrete action in the here and now to help live our best lives to the end.

CONTINUES
“Finish Strong” is the kind of book that comes along once in a generation, and Barbara Coombs Lee is nothing short of a historic figure. This book is a game-changing, paradigm-shifting work that will define an inflection point in the way our country thinks about and cares for people who are dying,” writes David Muller, M.D., Dean for Medical Education, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York. “This is a book that every one of us must read, and that we’ll all refer to repeatedly over the course of our lifetimes.”

Coombs Lee, an attorney who co-authored the nation’s first law authorizing medical aid in dying, the 1994 Oregon Death with Dignity Act, has worked for over 50 years in healthcare as a clinician, policymaker and advocate, most recently as CEO and now President Emerita/Senior Advisor of Compassion & Choices. It is the nation’s oldest and largest organization working to empower people to expand and improve their end-of-life care options.

Under her leadership, Compassion & Choices successfully led and supported legal and legislative campaigns to authorize medical aid in dying as an option for terminally ill adults in Washington, D.C., and seven states: California, Colorado, Hawaii, Montana, Oregon, Vermont and Washington to end their suffering peacefully.

“The terminally ill people I work with … want options that can allow death to come peacefully,” writes Coombs Lee. “But one out of every five U.S. adults will die in the ICU — because intense technology remains the signature of a healthcare system that views death as a failure.”

“Navigating the final stages of a progressive illness like ALS or Parkinson’s, emphysema, cancer or heart disease is hard … this is likely in your future, either on behalf of a loved one or for yourself,” concludes Coombs Lee. “… as someone who’s floundered, made mistakes, and suffered in the course of trying to navigate this rocky terrain. I hope by sharing how I fell short of my own ideals in dealing with my parents, you may be spared similar heartache.”

Finish Strong is for those of us who want an end-of-life experience to match the life we’ve enjoyed — defined by love, purpose and agency. We know we should prepare but are unsure how to think and talk about it, how to live true to our values and priorities as vigor wanes, and how to make our wishes stick, even if we can’t lift a finger to make it so.

Notable chapters include “Overtreatment and Diminishing Returns,” “Let Me Die Like a Doctor” and “Escaping Dementia.” Here is a YouTube video of Barbara talking about how to escape dementia: bit.ly/FinishStrongEscapingDementia

The empowering Finish Strong will guide you through:

» Finding a partner-doctor well-suited to your values and beliefs who exhibits humanity, deference and frankness.

» Staying off the “overtreatment conveyor belt.”

» Identifying what matters most as advancing illness takes its toll and defining your priorities.

» Having meaningful conversations with doctors and family about expectations and wishes for life’s last precious months.

» Knowing when “slow medicine” is the best option to maintain quality of life.

» Navigating home hospice, the ultimate healing experience.

Written with candor and clarity, this book’s stories, facts and dialogue will help prepare for latter days that retain the purpose, grace and dignity you’ve always valued. It can help you Finish Strong.

CONTINES
The book is receiving rave reviews from numerous respected thought leaders, ranging from Jeanne Phillips, nationally syndicated “Dear Abby” advice columnist; to spiritual icon Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu; NPR radio show host Diane Rehm, author of On My Own and former NBC correspondent Betty Rollin, author of Last Wish and First, You Cry:

“A movement is afoot in end-of-life medical care, but doctors are not its leaders ... this book is the field manual to turn wilderness exploration into a rewarding adventure.”

— Haider Warraich, M.D.
Foreword excerpt for Finish Strong
Author of Modern Death: How Medicine Changed the End of Life

“There is no more authoritative or informed individual than Barbara Coombs Lee to lead us in the battle for a peaceful and dignified end-of-life journey.”

— Diane Rehm, former host and executive producer of NPR syndicated The Diane Rehm Show
Author of On My Own

“Finish Strong is the clarion call for the end-of-life choice movement just as Our Bodies, Ourselves was for the women’s movement.”

— Jeanne Phillips, nationally syndicated “Dear Abby” advice columnist

“As a society, we need to acknowledge that a positive dying experience should not be left to chance. Barbara shows that it is not something to fear; instead, it’s something we should revere.”

— Dan Diaz, husband of the late Brittany Maynard, advocate for end-of-life care options

“Finish Strong serves as a ‘field manual’ for exploration of autonomy and self-determination in healthcare during the closing years of life.”

— Gov. Barbara Roberts, Oregon Governor 1991–95
Author of Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology

“Adults have the right to decide their own course of treatment at the end of life. Barbara Coombs Lee’s wise and compassionate book shows how best to do that.”

— Betty Rollin, author of Last Wish and First, You Cry

“Barbara Coombs Lee’s new book Finish Strong will help people who want to pass the gift of life back into the hands of their God thankfully and with dignity. It is a blessing.”

— Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

Compassion & Choices is the oldest, largest and most active nonprofit working to improve care and expand options for the end of life in the United States, with 450,000 supporters nationwide. For more information, visit CompassionAndChoices.org.
There is no more authoritative or informed individual than Barbara Coombs Lee to lead us in the battle for a peaceful and dignified end-of-life journey. She has been at the forefront since she helped draft the nation’s first medical-aid-in-dying law in Oregon. She covers all the issues we must address — from opening the conversations with our families to informing doctors about the kind of care we want at the end of our lives. Read Finish Strong and use it as a guide to consider your own final decisions.

– Diane Rehm, former host and executive producer of The Diane Rehm Show, and author of On My Own

Barbara Coombs Lee gives much-needed guidance on how we can keep our priorities straight as illness advances, helping us approach the end of life without inadvertently getting on a conveyor belt of tests, treatments and misery. Finish Strong serves as a ‘field manual’ for exploration of autonomy and self-determination in healthcare during the closing years of life.

– Gov. Barbara Roberts, Oregon Governor 1991-95 and author of Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology

Finish Strong is a game-changing, paradigm-shifting work that will define an inflection point in the way our country thinks about and cares for people who are dying.

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“Adults have the right to decide their own course of treatment at the end of life. Barbara Coombs Lee’s wise and compassionate book shows how best to do that.”

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Finish Strong includes beautiful and powerful stories of people facing the end of life in so many different but strong ways.

– Reverend Alexa Fraser, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling, Virginia

“Barbara Coombs Lee’s accounts of experiencing a good death in Finish Strong include the story of my wife, Brittany Maynard. Brittany’s determination to have control over her life’s end was possible because of Barbara’s advocacy for patients’ autonomy and her determination to challenge misguided norms.”

As a society, we need to acknowledge that a positive dying experience should not be left to chance. Barbara shows that it is not something to fear; instead, it’s something we should revere. Experiencing a good death is merely the conclusion of a good life.

– Dan Diaz, devoted husband of Brittany Maynard, and advocate for end-of-life options
“How can a person escape dementia?” and other questions for Barbara Coombs Lee, author of Finish Strong: Putting YOUR Priorities First at Life’s End and President Emerita/Senior Advisor of Compassion & Choices

For more than five decades, Barbara Coombs Lee has worked in healthcare as a clinician, policymaker and advocate. Her indelible experiences as an ER and ICU nurse and physician assistant at the bedside of dying people forged a deep respect for individual values and beliefs, and eventually led her to a career in law and health policy. Barbara’s work in public policy culminated in her becoming the first leader of Compassion & Choices, the nation’s oldest and largest organization working to empower everyone to chart their end-of-life journey. Thousands of personal experiences and the teachings of scholars and thought leaders around the globe inform her perspective. She is a seasoned writer, speaker and commentator.

As someone with both an inside and outside view of the modern American medical world, Barbara’s passion for transforming the end-of-life experience — by informing and empowering patients — infuses her new book, Finish Strong: Putting Your Priorities First at Life’s End. She calls for all Americans to join a patient-driven movement to dismantle the institutional and cultural barriers to living well to the very end.

How is Finish Strong different from other books that cover “aging in America”?

Barbara Coombs Lee: Finish Strong deals candidly with issues and experiences that other books covering aging avoid. It addresses fears and discusses ideas still often considered taboo.

Many journalists, doctors, bereaved spouses/adult children and even patients themselves, shocked or moved by their experience and newfound knowledge, are writing about America’s dysfunction in end-of-life care. Each of those books arises from its authors’ experiences. Each contributes to our national dialogue.

But up until now, no book has come with Finish Strong’s unique combination of 50+ years of firsthand experience in nursing, medicine, law, public policy and advocacy behind it to support its conclusions. What distinguishes Finish Strong from other books is its abiding philosophy of individual autonomy and passionate conviction that individuals can be empowered to chart a course for themselves — and loved ones — that reduces suffering and reflects their personal values and beliefs.
What does the title “Finish Strong” signify to you?

Barbara Coombs Lee: “Finish Strong” means we can be true to our priorities in life even as we near its end. We can stay strong, and resist a conveyor belt of futile tests and treatments that can steal precious time and diminish the quality of life.

Finishing strong will be different for different people. Upon learning they are nearing the end of life, some will examine their options carefully and decide to dedicate their final months to experimental and taxing treatment. Others may decide to spend precious energy focused on passing life lessons and values on to their heirs. But for those who choose to “finish strong,” the common thread will be a certain strength in knowing that treatment decisions were well-considered, and they honored the values and beliefs that gave meaning to the life that is ending.

What led you to write this book?

Barbara Coombs Lee: Americans’ blind faith in medical authority, the common idea that doctors know best which tests and treatments we need, is about to undergo a sea change. The purpose of this book is to help people navigate and implement that change.

Though my political and legal work have differed from my clinical work in nearly every way, they resemble it in one respect: They offered intimate dialogue with people in the final stages of their lives. And so it would seem — although I never set out to do so — that I’ve made a lifetime study of how Americans die.

And the truth is that dying in America is a terrible mess. So, in essence, Finish Strong is my invitation to readers to join the movement for autonomy over how we live as we age.

What touchy topics does Finish Strong address?

Barbara Coombs Lee: In addition to the question of how a person might escape advancing dementia with an intentional death (watch video answer at https://youtu.be/sM9X8udCJMo), Finish Strong discusses all available end-of-life options as a person transitions from treatments that attempt to cure, to treatments aimed at comfort and peace of mind. Experimental treatments, slow medicine, forgoing life-extending intervention, voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED) and medical aid in dying are all here, and none are presented as better or worse than any other. This is an open-minded and nonjudgmental book.

It gives you the inside scoop on hospice care, advance directives, DNRs, doctor-patient relationships and what people really face at the end of life. It discusses frankly the roles of technology and religion in the context of the modern dying experience in America. And it offers alternative ways to bring sacred rituals and narratives into your last days to offer meaning and closure to you and your loved ones as you plan your life’s end.

Most importantly, this book candidly answers the questions you may have about the mysterious world of dying and anticipates questions you might not even know to ask. I have has seen it all, from many vantage points, and my goal is to share what I know with you so you are empowered to craft the end-of-life experience you want and deserve.

What is the one thing that you hope people take from Finish Strong?

Barbara Coombs Lee: I hope readers come away with a sense of their own authority — feeling empowered to ask questions, test assumptions and decide on a course of treatment that honors the character and meaning of their lives.

Find out more about Barbara Coombs Lee and Finish Strong at FinishStrongTheBook.com
Over more than five decades, Barbara Coombs Lee worked in healthcare as a clinician, policy-maker and advocate. Her indelible bedside experiences forged a deep respect for individual values and beliefs and eventually led her to a career in law and health policy. For the last 25 years, she has advocated for initiatives that allow individuals a full range of options and much greater agency in their healthcare decisions.

Barbara's work in public policy culminated in her roles as chief executive officer and now President Emerita/Senior Advisor of Compassion & Choices, the nation’s oldest and largest organization working to empower everyone to chart their end-of-life journey. Thousands of personal experiences and the teachings of scholars and thought leaders around the globe inform her perspective. She is a seasoned writer, speaker and commentator.

Barbara's passion for transforming the end-of-life experience by informing and empowering patients infuses her new book FINISH STRONG. She calls for all Americans to join a patient-driven movement to dismantle the institutional and cultural barriers to living well to the very end.

She lives in Oregon.

FinishStrongTheBook.com