Important documents

No one likes to think about the possibility of being so ill or seriously injured that they can't communicate with a doctor directly about the kind of care they want. Unfortunately, that can happen. However, there are steps you can take to make sure your care is carried out in the way that you would choose if you are unable to make your wishes about medical treatment known.

When you make your preferences known, you benefit from making decisions at a time when you can thoughtfully consider them. Plus, you take stress away from loved ones, should they ever have to make medical decisions on your behalf in an emergency or end-of-life situation.

Decide in advance

The two documents discussed below deal with medical situations where you are unable to communicate directly about the kind of care you want. They are sometimes referred to as Advance Medical Directives, because they indicate your wishes in advance of you actually needing them.

The Directive to Physicians (Living Will) is a written statement in which you specify what type of care you want if you are terminally ill and dying, or if you are permanently unconscious (should you need a respirator to help you breathe, for example). It helps guide the actions of your doctor, family members and others making decisions about your care.

The Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare is a legally binding document in which you give someone else the authority to make healthcare decisions for you if you’re not able to make them yourself. If you do not have this document, the law specifies who will make decisions on your behalf. In some states this would be your spouse, adult children, parents or siblings (in that order). This type of power of attorney will only become effective if you become unable to communicate with your doctor.

It is not necessary to consult an attorney to complete these documents, although some people feel more comfortable having worked with their lawyer on these issues. Bear in mind that these documents may vary from state to state, so if you move or live in more than one location; make sure your documents are recognized in which you reside. Complete the forms and make sure they are signed, dated, notarized and witnessed, if required.

When you’ve finished them
• Talk with the persons to whom you’ve given durable power of attorney for your healthcare so they know their role in advance.
• Discuss your desires about care with these persons, so they are best able to make decisions that reflect your preferences and plans.
• Give your doctor a copy of these documents.
• If you have a chart at a hospital, ask that a copy of these documents be added to your file, or bring a copy with you when you go to the hospital.
• Keep copies near other important or legal papers, so someone looking through your belongings can easily find them.

The Directive to Physicians and Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare are very important in an era when medical technology can artificially prolong life for weeks, months and even years.

You can always make changes

Most hospitals can provide you with fill-in-the-blank forms for these documents. If you are using a pre-written form, realize that you have the right to change any of the language in the form. For example, the standard form might say: "I consider artificially administered nutrition and hydration to be forms of life-sustaining treatment and direct that, under my instruction, they be withheld or withdrawn the same as other forms of treatment." If you don't agree with this statement, cross it out entirely or modify it by allowing hydration to be given, or any other changes you desire.

Bear in mind that the Directive to Physicians is focused on situations in which a person has an incurable injury, disease or illness (certified to be terminal by two doctors), and that medical measures would only prolong the dying process. As you are able to communicate with your doctor, you'll be the one making the decisions about your own care. Should you be unable to communicate these wishes, this document lets your doctor know, in advance, what your wishes are.

One last point: Know that you can change, revise and update these forms as often as you like. Just make sure that all the key people have the most current copy.

Final note

No one enjoys thinking about the end of life. However, it is inevitable for all of us. Planning in advance for the worst that might occur may seem difficult, but actually brings great peace of mind, once completed. You will know not just that your wishes will be fulfilled, but that your family will be spared the agony of having to make painful decisions on your behalf. Remember that you can always change your end-of-life directives.

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