

Prepare for the future with an advance directive today

It has been five years since the country witnessed the emotional, controversial, and tragic ending of Terry Schiavo's life. What should have been a private affair ended up a media nightmare with the Florida Supreme Court deciding what Terry's end-of-life wishes would have been.

Terry's life and death painted a very graphic picture of what can happen when people don't have advance directives or living wills set up while they are healthy. Although her case is extreme, every day people grapple with the very difficult task of trying to figure out what their loved ones would want. With less than one-third of American adults having advance directives, it is likely that nearly everyone will have the unfortunate experience of going through that process.

Spare your loved ones from that work by taking the time today to fill out an advance directive form. It only takes 15-30 minutes and you can find the form online at the Maine Hospital Association at www.themha.org. Alternatively, you can make an appointment with an attorney to have someone help you through the process.

Here are the three major parts of the advance directive you need to consider:

1) You should appoint an agent or agents to represent your medical wishes. This is the most important action you can take. This person (or these people - appoint as many as you feel appropriate) will be your medical advocate. He or she will speak for you and make sure your doctors understand your wishes. When you choose an agent, you will need two adult witnesses to sign the form (and they cannot be your agent).

2) You can choose in advance which treatments you want when you're too sick

to communicate for yourself. You can decide how you want to be helped by heart-lung machines, how you want to be helped by artificial nutrition and hydration (such as the feeding tube), and how you want to handle your pain management.

3) You can determine how you want to handle organ donation. You will be letting the doctors know whether you want to donate your organs, and if you do, whether you want to donate them for transplantation only or also for scientific study.

Once you fill out your advance directive, do not just put it away in a safe place. Give a copy of it to all of your medical agents as well as your doctors. A copy of the signed form is as good as the original so make sure all of the people who will need it have it. In order for your advance directive to work, the people who will be making decisions on your behalf need to have access to it.

While it is difficult to think about yourself being too ill to communicate, it is important to record your wishes now, while you still can. Filling out an advance directive will give you the peace of mind that your wishes will be kept. It will also spare your family and friends the angst of trying to guess what you would want.

Take thirty minutes to fill out an advance directive and share with your loved ones. Once you're done, you can return your focus to living your life to its fullest.

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