

Health and Wellness

Provided by Bethany Care Ministry Outreach Program

END OF LIFE DECISIONS:

The Time to Plan is Now

Has someone you know experienced a health crisis and been unable to make decisions? Was he hooked to tubes or had his heart resuscitated with no real hope of recovery? Did you say, "Please God, don't let that happen to me." We all pray for health and a graceful end of life, but there are also measures we can take to make sure our wishes are known and honored.

ADVANCE DIRECTIVES

Advance directives are documents that put in writing how you would want decisions about your health made if not capable of speaking for yourself. There are two types of advance directives in Wisconsin: **Power of Attorney (POA) for Healthcare** and the **Living Will** (or Declaration to Physicians). Having an advance directive not only gives you peace of mind, it conveys your wishes to family and medical professionals, so they can base treatment on your values.

The POA for HEALTHCARE document allows you to choose someone you trust (called "agent") to make healthcare decisions for you, but only if you are declared by two doctors to be incapacitated. If you are temporarily not able to make decisions (like an accident) but then recover, you may make your own decisions again. It is important to discuss your wishes with your agent when choosing them, and you can fill out an addendum to the document to spell out those wishes. The POA for Healthcare is legally binding and can keep a person from needing a court appointed guardian if they become incapacitated.

HOW DO I GET AN ADVANCE DIRECTIVE?

Hospitals, clinics and homecare agencies all can provide forms and direction for filling out an advance directive. You can also get a consumer guide called, "A Gift to Your Family," which explains everything you need to know, provides forms and wallet cards. Obtain it from www.wisbar.org or State Bar of Wisconsin, Attn: Life Planning, P.O.Box 7158, Madison, WI 53703-7158. 1-800-728-7788

The LIVING WILL (or DECLARATION TO PHYSICIANS) declares your wishes for various life-sustaining measures (feeding tubes, resuscitation, etc) that may be considered if you are ever in a terminal state (like a coma) where you could not make decisions. Sadly, there are cases of people not able to speak for themselves, whose treatments were decided by the courts. The Living Will does give direction to the MD but is not binding and does not allow another person to speak for you. An addendum to a POA for Healthcare can provide the same information as a Living Will. If you choose to have both documents, make sure they are consistent.

If you do fill out an advance directive, keep a copy at home in a safe place. Give a copy to your agent and family members and your MD. Keep a card in your wallet saying you have an advance directive. An advance directive can be changed at a later date if you destroy it, make a new one with a later date, or cancel it in written or verbal form with two witnesses.

Megan Karth, RN, Bethany Community Care Ministry

