

Health Care Directives — Why the Big Fuss?

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Because we Minnesotans are taking better care of ourselves and seeking medical advice more regularly, we are living much longer than ever before. One of the side effects is that when we do grow old, our health may begin to fade and we may be in a position where decisions need to be made as to what, if any, medical treatment we will want. Health care directives allow us to express our wishes as to medical treatment in terminal-illness or injury situations, and to appoint someone to speak on our behalf in the event we cannot speak for ourselves.

A health care directive is a written legal document that designates a person to make health care decisions for you in the event you are unable to make them. In addition, the document defines the circumstances — such as if you are suffering from a terminal illness with no expectation of recovery — in which health care professionals should withhold or remove artificial life support or refrain from using heroic measures, you are unable to give informed consent due to incapacity, you want to donate your organs, and as to whether you want to be cremated or buried. Your providing such information and designating a health care agent means that the physician knows whose direction is to be followed in the event your family disagrees as to what medical treatment they think you would want. By expressing such preferences in a written legal document, you are ensuring that your preferences are made known.

After you have signed your health care directive, you will also need to discuss your preferences with others. Take the time to discuss them with the person you appoint as your health care agent. Talk to your physician. Make sure your family knows how you feel about end-of-life issues. The more these individuals know, the easier it will be for them to fulfill your wishes. Without such directives, your family may be forced to look to the court orders to deal with your medical situation.

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