

Talking with Your Family about Living Wills and Advance Directives

The job of parenting although rewarding, is often complex and at certain times can be considered difficult. Initiating tough discussions with children about important and sensitive issues is not an easy thing to do. Many family members, young and old alike, avoid talking about the subject of death. Yet, talking about dying while everyone is healthy will be much easier to do than when faced with a crisis or an emergency.

Depending upon the age of the child, of course, parents can involve children in a discussion about end-of-life issues in a non-threatening atmosphere. Opportunities arise, such as death of a neighbor, a friend, or a front-page news story, to talk about how death of a family member signifies changes to one's family life and affects every family member.

Parents themselves may have aging parents they are providing care for or who live in the home. Children are aware their parents transport grandparents to the doctor's office, or hospital stays, or even accompany them on visits to a nursing home. Discussion about caring for someone or making health care decisions for one who is no longer able to do so on their own, is a natural way to introduce the concept of "Living Wills," or "Advance Directives." Another term is "Power of Attorney for Health Care"; essentially all refer to the same thing: giving another person legal authority to make health care decisions on your behalf.

Explaining to children that advance directives or living wills are "written statements describing the type of care a person wishes to receive at the end of life" and need to be completed before a serious injury or terminal illness occurs is also important. A living will names a trusted person to speak on your behalf when you can no longer make decisions about the type of care provided by medical professionals.

Each state has laws regarding advance directives. In Nebraska, forms and information are available from the Nebraska Health and Human Services agency on aging, a legal services office or from your attorney. Caring Connections, a National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization website, www.caringinfo.org, has links to state-specific downloadable forms. The printable forms, when signed and completed, are legally binding. It is not necessary to have a lawyer complete an advance directive; Nebraska law requires a person to be at least 19 years of age and in sound mind to complete the document. It becomes legally binding if signed by the proper witnesses or the maker's signature has been notarized.

Expressing your desire for care and choosing “an agent” to act on your behalf is only part of the equation. Having a discussion with your family members and your physician about personal choices for medical intervention at the end of life are equally important. Copies of the completed document need to be in your medical file, with the chosen agent, and other family members as well. Having a completed form will not benefit anyone if no one knows about it.

Begin thinking about your own wishes for end-of-life care. There may come a day when you would be in a position to make decisions for a member of the older generation, or worse yet, your spouse or your own child. Having a discussion now with your children about your future choices will be an enormous help to them should they ever be in that decision-making role.

References:

Surrogate Decision Making in Nebraska, (2003) Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services, State Unit on Aging, Lincoln, NE

End-of-Life Decisions: Advance Directives, (2007) Caring Connections, National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, retrieved from website: www.caringinfo.org

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