

ADVANCE CARE ISSUES

Advance Care or End of Life Issues has been in the news for months, due primarily to the Terri Schiavo case. Advances in medicine and technology have made it possible to extend the life of young and old alike, beyond the point when they can make decisions for themselves. The Schiavo case has clearly sparked much debate. It has also brought to our attention the need for discussion and advanced directives for each and every one. These are difficult discussions to have with loved ones; without them families and healthcare providers (and the courts) are left to guess or interpret vague references said in passing. This should not be the way such important decisions are made. This two part article will explore how to have these discussions and the various tools available to individuals to ensure that their wishes are carried out in the event they are unable to speak for themselves.

Now is the time to speak with family or friends about what health care decisions you would want if you were unable to speak for yourself. Irregardless of age, everyone needs to be prepared because we can never know what the future may bring. We are good at planning for our estate, but not good about planning for the end of our life. The best decisions are made after good planning and good communication. First we must ask ourselves what fears we might have. Are we worried about pain, being alone, or being over-sedated? Do we prefer to remain in a hospital or other healthcare facility or would we like to go home? Once we've been honest with ourselves, we then should start talking with family and dear friends about our values and beliefs. How do you bring up the topic? Take advantage of the current news and discuss personal, spiritual and ethical views on the Schiavo case. Tell your loved ones not only what you think about this case, but how you feel about your own choices. Include discussion about resuscitation, life support systems, nutrition and hydration. Engage them in a discussion which respects differences of opinion. Understand that not everyone in your family may agree with you. Through these discussions, you will learn who is most comfortable with your choices and that may be the person best suited to be your "health care proxy". Remember, health care providers are trained to "do" something so if you do not want a particular procedure or therapy; you need a means of expressing your wish. If you have done no advance planning, the doctors may feel compelled to do all they can. If you haven't talked with your family or friend, you may place an unnecessary burden on them if the time comes when you can no longer make your own decisions.

Next month: Advance Care Tools

Kathy Laufer – 5/05