

Taking Care of Tomorrow Today

Do you worry about the medical care you would receive if you became ill or were unable to speak for yourself? By stating your health care preferences in writing before a health crisis occurs, you can ensure that you will receive the type or degree of care that you want.

There are many different and unique documents to help you plan your future health care needs. One of the biggest misconceptions about advance health care planning is that it is applicable only to the aging population. That could not be further from the truth. A person at any age can experience an accident, serious disease, or surgery that leaves them incapacitated and unable to make their own health care decisions. In Kansas, any competent person 18 years of age or older can, and should, plan for their health care in advance.

Legal documents, called advance directives, give you the opportunity to describe your wishes regarding future health care decisions. The most common advance directives are: durable power of attorney for health care, living will and pre-hospital DNR (do not resuscitate).

The durable power of attorney for health care allows you to name the person (agent) you want to make health care decisions for you if you are not capable of making decisions for yourself. This person can speak for you only if you are either temporarily or permanently incapacitated due to illness or injury, as determined by your attending physician. Your agent can make decisions about what doctors and health care workers to hire, the medical facilities where you will receive care as well as decisions about organ donation, autopsy and what to do with your body after death. The agent you choose should be someone you trust, who knows you well, who will advocate for you and who will honor your wishes.

A living will is an instruction list to your physician, family and friends that outlines what type of care you want, or don't want, in certain situations. Living wills address "life-sustaining procedures," or those that, according to your physician, prolong the dying process. Examples of these procedures are using a ventilator to sustain life or artificial nutrition and hydration. A living will becomes effective after you have been diagnosed and are certified in writing to have a terminal condition by two physicians.

The pre-hospital DNR is a written communication of your desire to not have resuscitation attempted should you stop breathing or your heart stop beating. Having a DNR means that you do not want to have CPR attempted by medical personnel if you are found without a heartbeat or are not breathing. For that reason, completing a DNR is a decision that should not be taken lightly. Typically, only terminally ill or incredibly frail elderly have a DNR.

In Kansas, you do not need an attorney to appoint a durable power of attorney for health care, to create a living will, or to create a DNR directive. Kansas offers fill-in-the-blank forms that you may complete on your own. It is recommended that you use these forms if you are not using the services of an attorney. K-State Research & Extension Marais des Cygnes District has a booklet, complete with forms, that explains in detail the steps to take for advance health care planning. A copy of this booklet is available on our website at www.maraisdescyignes.k-state.edu (visit the Home, Family and Money Management section). Booklets are also available by visiting our offices in Paola or Mound City.

Once your documents are completed, keep them in an accessible location and share them with close friends and family. Having copies of your documents at home, in your vehicle, with your physician and your health care agent will ensure they are readily available should they be needed in the event of an emergency.

Source: "Advance Health Care Planning in Kansas", Erin Yelland, Ph.D., Kansas State University. For more information about family resource management or adult development and aging, contact the Marais des Cygnes Extension District Paola (913-294-4306) or Mound City (913-795-2829) offices, or write to kgoul@ksu.edu or check out our website: www.maraisdescyignes.k-state.edu.