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Advance Medical Directives: Putting Direction In Your Future Healthcare

Each time you visit your physician, you make decisions regarding your personal health care. As difficult as it is to imagine, what happens if you become unable to make or communicate your own medical decisions?

If you do not have advance medical directives and are unable to yourself choose, then Indiana law allows any member of your immediate family to make choices for you. In an incapacitated stated, however, you will *not* have control over (a) who this person is (oftentimes the family member first located), or (b) what treatment this person chooses.

Alternatively, you can make and write down your own decisions about your future medical treatment. These written instruments are called advance medical directives. As long as you are able to decide and express your own decisions, your advance directives will not be used. Advance directives are not required. However, in the event you cannot speak for yourself, advance directives are a way to manage your future medical care and treatment.

The first type of advance medical directive is a living will. A living will is a written document that states a person's desires regarding the termination of life support in the event of a terminal, incurable medical condition. A living will often includes directions for CPR, artificial nutrition, maintenance on a respirator, and blood transfusions. In your living will, you elect (and thus unequivocally notify your physician and family members and unburden them with the decision) that you either want life-prolonging medical treatments used to extend your life, or conversely, that life-prolonging treatments should not be used so that you are allowed to die naturally.

The next type of advance medical directive is a medical power of attorney. A medical power of attorney is used to appoint a trusted person to make medical care decisions in the event you are no longer able. The written document could allow your chosen power of attorney to make choices about your health care, sign health care contracts for you, admit or release you from health facilities, or look at or get copies of your medical records. The living will and medical power of attorney generally go hand-in-hand so that your appointed power of attorney understands your treatment preferences.

Finally, while on the topic of you controlling your future medical treatment, it is a good opportunity to discuss organ donation. Persons that wants to donate organs may include their choice in their will, living will, driver's license, or other document.

Whether you choose to simply speak with your physician and family members or put these advance medical directives in writing, communication is key. Your wishes cannot be followed unless someone knows them! If you decide to prepare a living will and/or medical power of attorney, then it is important to keep the original(s) in a safe place and give copies to

your physician (to be made a part of your permanent medical record), the health care power of attorney you appointed, and any other family members that would need to know.

If you would like assistance with preparing and executing either a living will or health care power of attorney, then you should visit your local legal assistance office. Additionally, for more information you can contact the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) Advance Directives Resource Center at www.in.gov.isdh/25880.htm.

The information provided in this article is for educational and general information purposes only. It is not legal advice. We recommend speaking with a licensed attorney before relying on the information contained within to make a decision or take any action.