

## SOUL SEARCH

Think about how many events, over the course of your life, you have meticulously planned, ranging from the momentous occasions, such as birthdays, weddings, starting a family, anniversaries, getting a divorce, planning a funeral, to the relatively simple ones such as a party, a small dinner or get together. And then, think of all the attendant time you devoted to ensure that it all went smoothly, even, dare I say, *perfectly*, so that it went the way you wanted it to go. Yet, (...and be honest here – it's just you and me) how much time, mental and emotional energy, have you devoted to your planning for a temporary, catastrophic or terminal illness to ensure that your care, your "new reality", goes smoothly, the way you want it to go? Maybe it's not important to you; after all, you may think, "I'm on my way out, so what if I'm incapacitated – I won't know what's going on anyway". If you fall in line statistically with the rest of us, then you've not planned sufficiently, if at all. Medical/social science literature suggests that people don't do advance directives and when they do, the directives don't provide much guidance. Most are unfamiliar with advance directives, also known as "living wills, health care powers of attorney, health care proxies or surrogates". Many of those who are familiar with these documents do not understand the form they complete; most of those who complete the directive do not explain their wishes to the person they designate as health care agent; and, most do not submit a copy to their health care provider.

But just take a moment to ponder this: what about your family or friends upon whom the massive weight of this responsibility now rests - to manage your treatment when you are no longer able to, to make those critical decisions on your behalf that ought to reflect what you would have wanted, such as pain management or the extent, if any, of medical intervention.

What is your *definition* of "living a life"? From a horizontal position, lying in a hospital bed, this *definition* can take on a whole new meaning. As your loved ones watch, wait, feel, experience this process with you, empower them with the intimate knowledge

and understanding of how you "want it to go" in your final days or months on this earth, imbue them with the ability to "make the call" without having to live with the guilt associated with such a duty. Do the soul searching for yourself but then – **and this is critical** - communicate your concerns, your desires, your wants, your objectives, your 'definitions' to those you charge with this honor and do it over the course of many conversations, and again when your condition changes.

Although you can access a North Carolina advance directive on-line, I recommend you consult with an attorney who is both knowledgeable and experienced in helping navigate the process who can explain the consequences of the choices you make. The most important thing to remember is this: signing the health care advance directive does nothing but **begin** the process. Once you've executed the document, in front of two witnesses and a notary public, take it in your hand, deliver it to your named agent, your family, your primary care physician, your religious or spiritual leader and say, "Here is my advance directive. We need to talk..."

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