

NOTES TO AGENTS: This release is part of the Money Matters series offered by the Family Financial Education Team. This release will not be sent to statewide media. Please add local contact information and remember to alter the quotes if you substitute your own name in the release.

For Release: June 2006

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Advance planning helps families fulfill health care wishes

MADISON [YOUR TOWN], Wis.—Advances in medical technology now enable individuals to survive illnesses and injuries that once would have been fatal. These advances may be a blessing for many, but they also raise questions about the quality of a life prolonged artificially.

Planning for health care decision-making is not just an issue for seniors. Family members of all ages are now more aware of the need to talk about health care decisions, and they are making a special effort to put their wishes in writing.

"While it is not possible to consider every possible circumstance that may arise as you go through life, it is critical that your conversations with family members and your health care agent be as clear as possible," says Karen Goebel, University of Wisconsin-Extension family and consumer economics specialist [YOUR NAME, TITLE, COUNTY]. "Seriously exploring possible scenarios and the various outcomes will make it easier for the decision makers should a similar situation arise." If there is a certain illness in the family medical history, that might be a point for discussion.

Research suggests that many adults would prefer family members to make health care decisions for them. And while family members may be expected to act according to the patient's wishes, Wisconsin does not have a "next-of-kin" law automatically giving them the legal right to make decisions for their relative--unless they are named in an advance directives document.

You can learn how to create two advance directives documents yourself through a publication available from UW-Extension. "Advance Directives for Health Care: Wisconsin Living Will and Power of Attorney for Health Care" includes the "Declaration to Physicians," popularly known as a living will, and power of attorney for health care--documents that can legally provide health care decision-making when you are no longer able to do so for yourself.

"Advance Directives for Health Care" and other publications are available from your county UW-Extension office or from Cooperative Extension Publications (877-947-7827) and online at <http://cecommerce.uwex.edu/>.

"Advance Directives for Health Care" provides a guide and checklist to help you discuss health care decision-making with family members and health care providers to assure

appropriate action. It provides answers to commonly asked questions and a glossary of legal and technical terms found in the statutory forms. The publication also includes the current forms and is printable online. The forms are also available from the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services.

Since December 1991, the U.S. Patient Self-Determination Act has required that health care facilities receiving federal funds, such as Medicare and Medical Assistance, must give patients written information at the time of admission about their rights to accept or refuse medical treatment and to formulate advance directives. Many states, including Wisconsin, have enacted legislation to provide legal tools for advance planning. Separate statutory forms are available for Wisconsin residents to make a living will or a power of attorney for health care. These may be completed without the aid of an attorney. The forms are available online in the State of Wisconsin Consumer Guide to Health Care at <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/guide/legal/index.htm>.

In Wisconsin, a power of attorney for health care document supersedes or replaces a living will if the two documents conflict, unless the living will was completed before Dec. 11, 1991. If a living will and power of attorney for health care conflict over nutrition, hydration or pregnancy issues, it is possible that neither would be honored. Generally, the power of attorney for health care is the recommended document if you have someone you trust as agent to make your health care decisions. The living will may clarify your wishes and guide your health care agent. An optional section on donation of anatomical gifts has been added to the power of attorney for health care document.

Because laws regarding advance directives vary from state to state, if you travel or live in another state, it's important to check with a local doctor or health agency to be sure they will honor the Wisconsin forms.

Only you can make the decision about advance directives for health care after thinking about your values and beliefs. A section of the UW-Extension publication is designed to help you do this. Share your thoughts and actions with your doctor, family, friends and others who may be involved in making decisions for or with you. When you document your wishes before a medical crisis occurs, you can minimize family misunderstandings and be assured that your family knows what kind of care you want.

To learn more about family financial management, contact your county UW-Extension office [ADD LOCAL CONTACT INFORMATION].

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