

## **Choosing a Health Care Agent**

A health care agent is someone you designate to make medical decisions for you if, at some future time, you are unable to make decisions yourself. Your agent can be a close relative or a personal friend, but should be someone who knows you well and whom you trust. Your health care agent should be a person who knows your wishes about medical treatment and who is willing to take responsibility to ensure your wishes are followed. In most states, your agent can make decisions any time you lose the ability to make a medical decision, not just decisions about the end-of-life.

Ideally, your agent should be someone who is not afraid to ask questions of the healthcare professionals in order to get information needed to make decisions. Your agent may need to be assertive to ensure that your wishes are respected. Your agent will need to know as much as possible about your wishes and values regarding the use of medical technology. Not everyone is comfortable accepting this sort of responsibility; therefore, it is very important to have an honest discussion with the person you plan to appoint before you make the appointment.

### **Selecting an Agent**

- Select someone whom you trust and who understands your decisions.
- Because you are asking your agent to accept significant responsibility, be certain to ask your agent if he or she is willing to act on your behalf. Not everyone is able to be an effective agent.
- Talk to your agent about your wishes regarding end-of-life medical treatment. Even family members may not know how much treatment a loved one would be willing to accept near the end of life. Talking clarifies what you want and diminishes an agent's potential guilt and anguish over whether he or she is doing the right thing.
- Prepare and sign the appropriate advance directive forms for your state. Keep the original and give copies to your agent and alternate agents, family and doctors and have it placed in your medical record.

### **Benefits of Having an Agent**

- The agent knows you and understands your wishes about medical treatments. He or she can make decisions in situations you might not have anticipated.
- An agent has flexibility. He or she can talk with your physicians about your changing medical condition and authorize treatment or have it withdrawn as circumstances change.

- If you have prepared a living will, your agent can interpret it in situations that were not foreseen. Be sure to make clear in your living will that your agent should make decisions on how to interpret it or when to apply it.
- Your agent can advocate for you. If health care providers resist following your wishes, your agent can negotiate with them and take any other necessary steps to see that your wishes are honored.

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