

Kathleen Martin is an attorney with O'Donnell, Weiss & Mattei, P.C., and a newspaper columnist for The Mercury, which gave permission for this article to be reprinted.

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April 16 is national healthcare decisions day

National Healthcare Decisions Day is an annual event designed to encourage all Americans over the age of 18 years to talk about future healthcare decisions, especially end-of-life decisions, and to complete a living will (also known as an Advance Directive). According to the Pew Research Center's study in 2006, 71 percent of Americans have given thought to their end-of-life treatment decisions, and 95 percent of Americans have heard of a living will. However, only 29 percent of Americans had a living will (www.nhdd.org). Hopefully those numbers have improved in 2014, but the sad fact is that most Americans still have not executed a living will.

National Healthcare Decisions Day is intended to raise awareness of the need for a written document in which you express your wishes for your treatment, or lack of treatment, if you are in an end stage medical condition or permanently unconscious. This written directive allows someone else to make decisions for you if you cannot. Even more important than just having the written instructions is to name a decision maker, with alternates, and to talk with them about what you think that you would want. The document can always be revoked, and if you are able to make the decisions, it will always be your choice. Nevertheless, a living will, preferably coupled with a Healthcare Power of Attorney, is a wonderful gift to your loved ones so that they can follow your wishes and choices. It removes the burden from your loved ones when they can serve as your *advocate* rather than your decision maker.

This is a good opportunity to talk with your loved ones about having their own living wills. Suppose a parent is in the hospital unconscious and not expected to survive, and they have not indicated their wishes in writing. This can become a difficult situation depending on the family dynamics. We all have a fundamental right of self-determination, but if the discussions have never occurred, it is up to family members, the order or hierarchy of which is designated by statute in Pennsylvania, to make decisions for their loved ones. Those persons might be unwilling to serve, or may make decisions based upon their own feelings and values rather than that of the ill loved one.

Starting the conversation is more than indicating one's preferences for care. It helps to clarify one's values and helps in selecting an agent to carry out one's healthcare decisions if and when you cannot speak for yourself. If you do not have a living will, then the Pennsylvania statutes will direct who is to make your decisions for you. That might not be the person or persons you wish to identify your care preferences. Although none of us is certain what we would want in every situation, we can indicate that person or persons we think are most likely to understand and carry out our values and beliefs.

The National Healthcare Decisions Day website has a number of resources to help you get started. Go to www.nhdd.org/public-resources for more information. Although a Healthcare Power of Attorney with Living Will is more comprehensive, a living will on its own is still extremely important and lack of access to an attorney should not stop you. Start the conversations today!