WHAT CAN YOUR HEALTH CARE AGENT DO?

Anyone over the age of 18 should have Advance Directives in place that appoint a person to speak and make medically and quality-of-life related decisions for them if they are unable to speak for themselves. If you are able to speak for yourself, you will always be the decision maker.

It is important to understand the scope of responsibilities a Health Care Agent may have on your behalf. It is also important to understand that this person may be acting for you in an emergency or over the course of many years. You may not have a perfect candidate in mind, but beginning with your resources, values and goals in mind is essential. Here is a list of some of the primary responsibilities and activities your Agent might take part in or oversee:

- Learning the basic terminology and course of any medical condition you have.
- Reviewing your medical records and history.
- Meeting your physician and other health care providers to discuss your medical condition and your goals and wishes, or helping you secure a primary physician.
- Monitoring treatments prescribed by different physicians.
- Contacting patient representatives in hospital or care facilities, if there is a conflict or confusion the Agent cannot resolve on their own.
- Calling an ethics consultation if there is a need, or filing legal action.
- Making decisions about where you will live or go for treatments.
- Understanding and making decisions about end-of-life care options.
- Assessing the need to hire home care or obtain mental or emotional support for you.
- Making decisions about whether to continue or stop life-support measures.
- Meeting with your family and any other significant persons, like clergy, about their role and your goals and wishes.
- Making sure your medical choices and advance directives match the orders written by your primary physician in a medical setting.
- Keeping themselves apprised of changes in your family dynamics, your medical conditions and coverage, your living situation and your support systems.

Ideally, these are the qualities that your Agent should have or be willing and able to develop:

- A clear understanding of and respect for your values and health care goals
- The ability and willingness to follow your wishes and goals
- A clear understanding of what you consider quality of life and how that changes as your life circumstances change
- The ability to work with others (medical providers, family, etc.) to reach outcomes that match your goals
- The ability to explore complex situations and choices, alone or ideally with a team, and make decisions that may involve some guesswork
- The ability to function under stressful conditions in complex situations
- The ability to question and challenge medical and interested people if the need arises
- Availability now and in the future

Who are you considering choosing as a Health Care Agent? Why?

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Who would you not consider as a Health Care Agent? Why not?

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If the person you are considering would be unavailable or unwilling to serve in that role, who would be the next person (or two) you would hope to invite?

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Finally, consider who are the people who are invested in your health and well-being in general?

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