

K-State Research & Extension News for April, 2024

File Your Taxes Then Set a Family Meeting

Submitted by Kathy Goul, Family & Consumer Science Agent

The title of today's article probably has you puzzled. Filing taxes usually does not prompt having a family meeting – unless your tax return gives you a windfall of money you would like to share! While I do not have a windfall of money to share, I do have information to share that I feel is important to every family.

I recently learned that, in 2008, April 16th was designated as National Healthcare Decisions Day. This day was chosen, based on the famous quote by Benjamin Franklin that “[I]n this world, nothing is certain except for death and taxes.” NHDD, as it has become known, is a day set aside to have conversations with family about advance health care planning. By stating your health care preferences in writing before a health crisis occurs, you can ensure that you will receive the type or degree of care you want should you become unable to speak for yourself.

Initiating a conversation with others about end-of-life wishes can be unsettling. I have been there. It is hard. But the truth is, these conversations are a whole lot easier than being placed in a situation where health care providers need you to make a decision and you are not sure what your loved one's wishes are. They are conversations for both the young and old. A person at any age can experience an accident or serious disease that leaves them incapacitated and unable to make their own health care decisions. In Kansas, any competent person 18 years of age or older can plan for their health care in advance, and should do so.

I often get asked what is involved in advance health care planning and whether or not someone needs to hire an attorney to help with the process. The good news is, in the state of Kansas, you can complete all advance health care planning forms without the assistance of an attorney.

A durable power of attorney for health care enables you to appoint an “agent” who will be able to make health care decisions on your behalf. This person can speak for you only if you are either temporarily or permanently incapacitated due to illness or injury, as determined by your doctor. These health care decisions include, but are not limited to, making treatment decisions for you, what health care personnel to hire and in which medical facilities you will receive care. The agent you choose should be someone you trust, who knows you well, who will advocate for you and who will honor your wishes.

A living will allows you to put in writing the wishes you have for your end-of-life care in the event that you cannot communicate those wishes directly. Unlike the durable power of attorney for health care, this document does not appoint someone to be your voice. Rather, you are able to state, in writing, what type of care you want at the end of your life. It is an instruction list to your family, friends and health care providers that specifically outlines what type of care you want in certain situations, and what type of care you don't want.

In addition to advance directives, there are individual documents that address more specific issues. The most common of these is a do not resuscitate order, commonly known as a DNR. A DNR is a legal document that allows you to communicate, in advance of a medical emergency, your desire to not have CPR attempted by medical personnel should you stop breathing or your heart stops beating. For this reason, completing a DNR is a decision that should be given a lot of thought. Typically, only terminally ill or incredibly frail elderly have a DNR directive or order.

While the number of people in the United States having advance health care directives in place has increased, two-thirds of Americans still have no advance health care planning documents in place. Most of us recognize that we should have “the talk”, but have not followed through. Sometimes we just need a catalyst. For my family, conversations began as a result of my mother’s terminal illness. In reality, these conversations should have taken place years before she became ill. Begin the conversations sooner rather than later. Advance health care planning is one of the most important gifts you can give your loved ones. I know that from personal experience.

K-State Research & Extension offers a comprehensive packet on Advance Health Care Planning. Visit our website at www.maraisdescygn.es.k-state.edu, or give our office a call at 913-294-4306 for a printed copy. This packet includes information about advance directives as well as forms to complete for Kansas residents. For more information on how to start the conversation with loved ones, visit www.theconversationproject.org and download the free conversation starter guide.