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End of Life Decisions In A Brave New Medical World

By Kristi Sweeney, CFP

There will come a time (brief or prolonged) that because of illness, accident or dementia, you or someone you love will not be able to make end of life decisions. It is at this time that any written directions you have prepared and opinions you have shared will be put to the test.

Medical technology has shifted decisions made by "nature" to us, giving us the power to either prolong life with pills or shorten life by withholding drugs. With all of the excitement of future possibilities in the medical arena, the Pandora's Box of medical miracles will not be easily shut. The same medicine can extend normal healthy lifetimes and prolong misery for people near death. Increasingly, medical providers must defer to legal written directives or to family decisions to withhold or provide life-prolonging care.

What will happen when it is your turn to make decisions for someone you love? Will your family support you? Will you agree to heroic efforts for Dad even though he suffers...or only pain management for Mom so she won't? Which decision can you live with? Knowing what your parents, spouse or child would want can help.

Recently, I had a "what would you want" discussion with my mother, prompted by the death of my mother-in-law. Here's what my Mom said- "I have a friend who recuperated, (though she's not the same) after being in a coma for three months. Isn't it wonderful that her kids didn't give up hope?" That tells me something, but I still hope my parents put something in writing and chose their healthcare proxy. It's their choice, as long as we know what they want when we may be forced to decide for them.

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There was no guess with my mother in law who suffered from Alzheimer's Disease for ten years. Literally every *five minutes* she'd say, "You'll be shocked to know that I can't wait to die and get it over with!" Pretty clear. Over the years, while she was clear of mind, she'd also completed all the forms and documents that put her wishes in writing and kept them up to date.

Even so, every decision about medications and hospitalizations made on her behalf in the months before she died were tough. I can't imagine how we could have withstood the pressure *put on us by providers* without a clear understanding, verbally and in writing, of my mother-in-law's wishes.

Clearly, we could all be burdened by life and death decisions for those we love- no matter which side of the fence we sit on. Living Wills, Medical Directives, Powers of Attorney for financial and medical decisions are the only real lines we can draw in our brave new world of amazing life-prolonging medical technology.