

## Advance Directives

The recent publicity surrounding the Terry Schiavo case has raised awareness of advance directives and the importance of having one's wishes regarding life and death issues clearly communicated.

An advance directive is simply a statement which describes how you want medical decisions made. There are two types which are legal documents. The first is a *living will* which states a person's desire whether to receive or withhold life support procedures. This is a statement of your feelings about being kept alive by artificial means. It can be as detailed as you want it to be. The living will is only applicable after physicians have determined that you are unable to make decisions for yourself because you are either in a coma or too ill to be aware of your circumstances. The second is a *health care proxy*, sometimes called, *durable power of attorney for health care*. With this document you designate a health care agent, and even an alternative, who will communicate your wishes when you cannot. Again, a physician determines that you are unable to make decisions for yourself before the proxy is relied on. A lawyer is not necessary for either document but they must be signed in the presence of two adults who are not also listed on the proxy. The documents do not need to be notarized. The health care proxy is the only one considered valid in Massachusetts. It is a good idea, however, to have both. Your designated health care agent can then have your written living will to support his choices for your care. Take your health care proxy document with you, if you are hospitalized.

Some people who are terminally ill have *Do Not Resuscitate* (DNR) orders, signed by their doctor, and posted in the home. The person has decided that he/she would not want to be revived in the case of a sudden cardiac or pulmonary arrest. Emergency medical services in Massachusetts do not recognize these orders and will attempt to resuscitate if they are called to a home in an emergency. Effective January 1, 2000, the emergency services (EMT's) honor as valid, a *Comfort Care* form or bracelet. This is an official form from the state which is signed by you and your doctor. It provides a verification/authentication of DNR orders for emergency personnel, in the home setting. Usually a person who chooses this option decides that they would not want to be kept alive by artificial means or to be resuscitated in the event of a sudden life threatening event. They do desire to be kept comfortable, either by medications, oxygen or other soothing measures and would seek medical attention for correctable problems. Any of the mentioned documents can be revoked at any time.

Please consult your physician for further information if you are interested in knowing about these options. You can learn more about Comfort Care on the web at [www.Mass.gov](http://www.Mass.gov).