

Q) What are Advanced Directives? Martha Wiggins Bradenton, FL

A)

Every competent adult has the right to make decisions concerning his or her own health, including the right to choose or refuse medical treatment. When a person becomes unable to make decisions due to a physical or mental change, such as being in a coma or developing dementia (like Alzheimer's disease), they are considered incapacitated. (Chapter 765, Florida Statutes). The law recognizes the right of a competent adult to make an advance directive instructing his or her physician to provide, withhold, or withdraw life-prolonging procedures; to designate another individual to make treatment decisions if the person becomes unable to make his or her own decisions; and/or to indicate the desire to make an anatomical donation after death.

By law hospitals, nursing homes, home health agencies, hospices, and health maintenance organizations (HMOs) are required to provide their patients with written information concerning health care advance directives.

An advance directive is a written or oral statement about how you want medical decisions made should you not be able to make them yourself and/or it can express your wish to make an anatomical donation after death. It is always best to put your wishes into writing while you are still healthy and not under stress to make decisions

Three types of advance directives are:

- A Living Will
- A Health Care Surrogate Designation
- An Anatomical Donation

A living will is a written or oral statement of the kind of medical care you want or do not want if you become unable to make your own decisions. It is called a living will because it takes effect while you are still living. I recommend you speak to your health care provider or attorney to be certain you have completed the living will in a way that your wishes will be understood.

A health care surrogate designation is a document naming another person as your representative to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to make them yourself. You can include instructions about any treatment you want or do not want, similar to a living will. You can also designate an alternate surrogate.

An anatomical donation is a document that indicates your wish to donate, at death, all or part of your body. This can be an organ and tissue donation to persons in need, or donation of your body for training of health care workers. You can indicate your choice to be an organ donor by designating it on your driver's license.

The basic forms are simple and do not require an attorney, though you may choose to consult one. However, an advance directive, whether it is a written document or an oral statement, needs to be witnessed by two individuals. At least one of the witnesses cannot be a spouse or a blood relative.