

End of Life Decisions

One of the most difficult decisions to make is an *End of Life* choice for another. If the person has informed you in the past of his or her wishes, the task is a bit easier. If the person has not informed you, the task can be heart wrenching.

Pastoral Care is here to help you address some of the spiritual and emotional issues concerning the *End of Life*. The following is a spiritual, non-denominational approach to the subject. The medical team will answer any medical questions with regard to the treatment of your significant other.

Why am I in this position? you may wonder. You have been entrusted with making *End of Life* decisions because you are either in the patient's immediate family or close circle of loved ones. You may have been chosen by the patient because you could be trusted to carry out his or her wishes.

You might still ask, *Why doesn't the medical staff make the decision? Wouldn't they know more about what is going on?* If the issues were only medical, the medical staff *would* make all the decisions. But in cases where extraordinary means are needed to extend life, we must address the spiritual and emotional issues as well.

Because of your personal knowledge about the philosophies and beliefs of the patient, you are recognized as the best qualified to express the patient's wishes to staff about extraordinary means to extend life, especially when there is no *Living Will*.

The patient's beliefs may be expressed in a formal statement in a *Living Will*, or he or she may have only informally expressed beliefs about these matters at an earlier time when the



patient was in good health. Whatever the source of your personal insights, you know this individual both spiritually and emotionally better than any member of the medical team. This is why you are making decisions with regard to the treatment of this patient.

This can be a heavy burden to bear. Many are fearful of this responsibility because they feel like they are "playing God," deciding if and when someone should live or die.

Making *End of Life* decisions for a loved one is *not* playing God.

Because of the advances made in medical science, we are able to keep a person's body functioning a very long time. Many of the people now on life support would have died a natural death much more quickly in years past.

We wonder, *Are they alive today because of God or because of life support? Are we getting in the way of God bringing someone home to heaven? When we make a decision to take someone off life support, are we playing God?* No, we are not. What we are doing is putting the person into God's hands. God will make the decision as to whether he or she will continue to breathe and whether his or her heart will continue to beat.

The Living Will

If you have a *Living Will* for the patient, read it prayerfully. As you read, questions may arise. Check with other family members, trusted friends, the Chaplain, and the medical team for their interpretation of any particular issue. After arriving at an understanding of the wishes of the patient, you should inform the medical team of your decision. At this time, you might want to continue treatment as is, or to put restrictions on what may or



may not be permitted, or to withdraw all treatment and to keep the patient comfortable.

If no *Living Will* is available, it will be your responsibility to decide *what your family member or loved one would desire under the existing circumstances*. You want to make sure this is an informed decision. If there are other family members, you should speak with them as to what they understand the patient's intention would have been in this situation.

Making the Best Decision Possible

You should also sit down with the medical team and ask all the questions you might have at this time. *"What is the possibility of a full recovery? If a full recovery is not possible, what can be expected for the future? What is being done medically and what is the expected outcome of these things (procedures, interventions, etc.)"* After receiving the answers, you may still be unclear or confused. Please, ask for further explanations. It is your right to fully understand.

While praying for your loved one, you might ask God to enlighten you and the medical team as to what is best for him or her.

You might contact a member of your clergy or spiritual leader to discuss the teachings of your faith with regard to *End of Life* issues and what rituals may be available for the sick.

After you have weighed all your information with regard to his or her treatment, then it is time to make a decision and inform the medical team. Once again, you might want to continue treatment as is, or to put restrictions on what may or may not be permitted, or to withdraw all treatment and to keep the patient comfortable.

"Did I make the right decision?" After you make the decision, do not second-guess yourself. You have taken the time to pray upon the deci-