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Our End of Life Letters

Having our life prolonged as long as possible is one thing, but having our death a prolonged event is an altogether different matter. Medical science has the ability to keep our bodies going long after our spirits have departed and our purses are empty. Protection from too much treatment is available to us through what is now called the Advance Directive, previously known as a combination of the Living Will and Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care.

Let's be clear: Advance Directives should not be thought of as legal instruments. Rather, as forms, they provide us the opportunity to state the kind of treatment we would want in our latter days. In the event we are no longer able to make health care decisions, we can name other(s) who know what we want and can act and decide on our behalf. In effect, they are letters to our family and doctors.

It has been shown that hope near life's end is a vital boost to morale, and this hope derives from having some control over events. This is what Advance Directives offer. We have the chance to choose and to limit, often, the treatments available. We can put a brake on the sheer momentum of treatment.

What is most crucial about Advance Directives is, first, they give us a way of thinking about our latter days, and second, provide us with a vehicle to talk to our family and doctor about our views. It is important not only that we make out these forms, but that we distribute them to all who have any voice or concern about our dying.

Then follows the most important element – a conversation with family members who will be involved in those latter days. It is this conversation, the conveyance of our wishes in dialogue form, that enhances the possibility our wishes will be fulfilled at life's end. If those wishes are not being fulfilled in the hospital, families have the ability to call into session the hospital's ethics committee to make clear to all our choices and wishes.

Westminster Cares has the necessary forms available for you. It is best and easiest to fill out these forms in conversation with someone. Westminster Cares can contact Ray Walker, M.D., to be available to answer your questions and help you fill out your Advance Directive. You can choose a place convenient for you. There is no charge for the service.

Dr. Ray Walker helps people in Windham County write Advance Directives. He has been a psychoanalyst in the Jungian tradition and now resides in Guilford, Vt.