

Some Important Thoughts

This month I want to deal with an issue that is very important to all of us. Health Directive Documents give our loved ones and our health care providers some indication of what we desire with regard to our end-of-life issues. All of us need these documents in place. I have seen the failure to plan tear families apart. I wish to republish some thoughts written by Chaplain Paul Schwan, which may help all of us and those we love.

"My Father had the Opportunity to Go to Heaven Last Week"

"My father had the opportunity to go to heaven last week, and we denied him that peace and glory. Instead, we treated his pneumonia and some other infection with antibiotics and oxygen and now he sits in a nursing home, oblivious most of the time to what is going on around him, and when he is lucid, he moans and wants "Jesus to take me".

My father decided some time ago to make himself a DNR. He does not want to be resuscitated, he does not want us to intervene in the natural progression of his illnesses. But the other night, we did so, thinking we were doing the best for him by treating a symptom of a much larger disease process. At the time the ER physician told us that my father had pneumonia and that she was starting an antibiotic, we did not question the wisdom of that course of action. Of course, the ER physician does not know my father, or what he has been through for the past few years. This physician could not counsel us on the long term consequences of this immediate decision. I have found out that it is up to us, my father's family, who know him best and have been through his illness by his side each day, to ask the right questions and protect my father from artificially prolonging his life on this earth. What a wonderful thing pharmaceuticals

are, but when you are dealing with someone who has had a major heart attack eleven years ago, numerous pace makers placed, a long list of medications, incontinence, CHF for years with an ejection fraction of 15% and someone with increasing dementia that stops him from interacting with the world around him, those drugs that temporarily stop the natural progression of one's chronic diseases are a barrier to peace, comfort and real joy. For those of us, like my Father, who are firm believers in

the temporary nature of this life on earth and the great joys of heaven, doing anything to prolong one's life on this earth no matter how filled with suffering that life is, is not only something

to be avoided, but something that denies our very faith.

Some in the medical field call it "prolonging death". Maybe God knew what he was doing when he created natural symptoms to long chronic illnesses that would end one's life on this earth. Maybe He was being merciful and gracious and very loving when He made decisions on how chronic illnesses would progress and how they would end. And we do all in our power to divert the natural progression, to throw a wrench in the machinery that God created, by using machines and drugs to divert and stop a natural process.

Machines and drugs are wonderful rescues for people who have a medical crisis in their life and have every hope of returning to a life of interaction and joy. But I think we have really overreached the purpose of those machines and drugs when we use them to stop the progression of a chronic, debilitating illness like dementia or congestive heart failure. The next time my father develops an infection that threatens his life on this earth, we will ask the questions: "What are we doing here? Are we denying my father peace and joy? Are we merely reacting to a symptom of a much larger plan created by God? Are we doing what's best for my father?"

That is my pledge to my father as his son: to ask those questions and make decisions that are best for him - I can't think of a more loving and merciful act than not denying my father the opportunity, when it presents itself, of going to heaven and knowing the peace and joy that God has waiting for him."*

* Marti wishes to thank Reverend Paul Schwan, Director CSM Chaplain Services, Columbia St. Mary's Hospital, Mequon, Wisconsin for giving permission to reprint his words.

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