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Living will a 'gift' to family

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Mary Poehling was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer more than two decades ago.

With the prognosis in hand, the La Crosse, Wis., woman sat down with a pen and paper and put her wishes into words. She calmly called her five sons and her daughter together and explained exactly how she wanted to live out the remaining days of her life.

It was a conversation that struck home with her daughter, retired hospice nurse Betty McKillip.

"She really had everything in order, and it made a difference to my five brothers and me," McKillip of Crystal Lake said Thursday. "When the patient has control and they face decisions, he or she dies with so much more peace and dignity at the end."

Poehling had completed an advanced directive, or living will. Those legal documents spell out for doctors and family members what sort of health care the writer would like to receive in his or her final days.

The problem is, Poehling and other area advocates said, that too few people actually complete the paperwork. An informational session and town-hall meeting, scheduled for April 16 at McHenry County College, is aimed at educating people on advanced directives and giving them the information they need to spell out their final wishes.

The meeting, which starts at 7 p.m. in the college conference center, will include a round-table discussion of area ethicists, health care providers and religious leaders on the nature and importance of the documents. It is part of a nationwide effort to focus attention on advanced directives.

"It's the best way of ensuring that people know what your wishes are," said James Gould, a philosophy instructor at McHenry County College. "It really helps families make those hard decisions in a way that has less conflict and less guilt. I remember talking with a local doctor, and he has often said to families, 'I know this is hard for you but this is what your mother wanted done.'"

According to statistics released by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, fewer than half of severely or terminally ill patients have an advanced directive.

And of those who did have their living will in place, only 12 percent had received input from their health care provider. Consequently, those advanced directives assisted families in making end-of-life health decisions in fewer than half of the cases in which a directive existed.

Jon Radulovic, the vice president of communications for the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, said many people didn't think about advanced health care issues. When they do think about it, Radulovic said, the topic is difficult to discuss with family members.

"People find themselves in hospitals facing possible interventions that they might not want," he said. "Or family members face decisions and they don't have a clue of what they need to do for someone in a health care crisis.

"It really is a gift of peace of mind."

If you go:

What: A community meeting on advanced directives, or living wills

Who: Current and retired health care providers, ethicists and religious leaders will lead the meeting, which is open to all members of the public