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Make your choice about end-of-life care now

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Written by

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Tim McGraw's hit song "Live Like You Were Dying" tells of a man who learns he doesn't have long to live and is asked how he handled the news. McGraw sings: "He said, 'I was in my early 40s / With a lot of life before me / And a moment came that stopped me on a dime. / I spent most of the next days, lookin' at the X-rays / Talkin' 'bout the options and talkin' 'bout sweet time.'"

Isn't that exactly what most people must do when the end of life suddenly moves from an obscure and distant future to the here-and-now present? They must start talking about their options and making some major health care decisions that can be difficult even in the best of circumstances. Imagine making those decisions when you've just been diagnosed with a terminal illness or you're faced with an unexpected medical emergency. Now, go one step further and imagine how much more difficult those decisions become when you must make them for someone else.

The good news is that by enacting the Patient Self-Determination Act of 1990, Congress affirmed the right of every citizen to set forth his or her future health care wishes in writing with an "advance directive" (a health care proxy or "living will"). This means that each of us has the right to provide guidance to our health care providers and our loved ones about what we want, even when we cannot speak for ourselves. By naming a health care proxy (or "agent") and documenting the types of care you do and/or do not want, you're making it much more likely your wishes will be heard.

The not-so-good news is that various estimates suggest only about 25 percent of all Americans have completed their advance directives. Because they can be created without a lawyer for free and relatively easily, this figure is surprisingly low.

In response, the Southern Tier End of Life Coalition, along with other national, state and community organizations, are leading a massive effort to highlight the importance of advance health care decision-making — an effort that has culminated in the designation of April 16 as National Healthcare Decisions Day. The goal of this nationwide initiative is to ensure all adults with decision-making capacity have both the information and the opportunity to communicate and document their future healthcare decisions. Local events and resources to help people talk about their wishes and execute advance directives in accordance with New York state laws can be found on the coalition's website at www.steolc.org or by calling 722-1251.

According to Nathan Kottkamp, health care attorney and chairman of National Healthcare Decisions Day, the bottom line concerning health care is that "your decisions matter." Kottkamp claims there are no wrong answers when thinking about health care choices and completing an advance directive. Important to remember, however, is that others need to know your wishes to honor them. So rather than waiting for a moment that stops you on a dime, I urge you to use April 16 to decide, discuss and document your wishes, whatever they may be.

Cordisco, a Binghamton resident, is executive director of Action for Older Persons Inc. and chairperson of the Southern Tier End of Life Coalition