

Living Wills / Advanced Medical Directive

Nowadays, there are many treatments, which offer patients with serious or terminal illnesses the chance to live longer. These treatments include chemotherapy, being fed through a tube or being kept alive on a life support machine.

However, in some cases, these treatments may offer little or no chance of recovery and they may have side effects that could be considered worse than the illness or leave the person in a condition he or she would find unbearable.

You may feel strongly that you do not want to go through this treatment to make you live longer. However, in the future you may not be physically or mentally able to make the decision or talk to your doctors about what you want, for example, if you were in a deep coma or suffered serious dementia. A Living Will (often known as an 'advance directive' or 'advance refusal') allows you to state, which treatments you would or would not want if you became seriously ill in the future and could not say what you wanted to happen.

Some people confuse the issue of refusing treatment under a living will with voluntary euthanasia. The two issues, although related, are separate. If you make a living will you are asking doctors not to give you certain medical treatments. Voluntary euthanasia is when you ask the doctor to deliberately end your life.

Valid living wills are legally enforceable and recognised by the British Medical Association.

A great benefit of having a Living Will in place is that your loved ones know your wishes and are not left to make what can be a very difficult decision for them without knowing your feelings.

Living Wills do have some restrictions. You cannot use them to refuse basic nursing care which is given to all patients, for example, basic hygiene; or ask that staff do not offer you food and drink by mouth.

Knowing what you want will help doctors to make the right decision in difficult situations.

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