

Media Release

For Immediate Release

How Much Say Should You Have in Your Future Medical Care?

The removal of Terri Schiavo's feeding tube in 2005 was at the centre of a legal, political and religious battle that attracted worldwide attention. Ms Schiavo was in a persistent vegetative state for 16 years. Her husband and family disagreed over the removal of her feeding tube, which would result in her death. As Terri had left no written record (i.e. advance directive/living will) it was unclear what medical care she would want. After several court appeals Terri's feeding tube was removed and she died in March 2005 in the midst of a media circus.

An advance directive is a statement made by a competent adult relating to the type and extent of medical treatments they would or would not want to undergo in the future should they be unable to express their wishes. It may also include a proxy directive, where an individual can nominate someone to make medical decisions on their behalf.

Many people, if possible, want to remain active participants in making important decisions about their own medical care and avoid the possibility of being over-treated or under-treated when they are no longer in a position to accept or decline such care. Writing an advance directive can remove the burden of having to make difficult medical decisions from the shoulders of family members or friends. Preparing an advance directive can foster communication between patients, their family and doctors and allows individuals to express their values and preferences regarding illness, medicine and dying.

Limitations of advance directives are that people may feel unable to fully comprehend the wide spectrum of clinical conditions they may face in the future and therefore may be unable to state clear treatment preferences in advance. Also a person's perspective of illness may change drastically when they actually experience it. For instance, a healthy person may state a preference for death over disability, but may change their minds when they are faced with the reality. Finally, as there is no specific legislation regarding advance directives it is unclear what impact they will have on the medical decisions made by doctors and family and the care received by a patient.

The Irish Council for Bioethics is undertaking a survey to examine how people feel about expressing their wishes for future medical care. Dr Siobhán O'Sullivan, Scientific Director of the Irish Council for Bioethics said "illness is something, which affects every family and in an ageing population the issue of advance directives is something we need to contemplate. The Irish Council for Bioethics is therefore eager to hear the views of the Irish public on this important matter".

Questionnaires are available from the Irish Council for Bioethics, 19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2, (ph: 01 6380920) and must be returned by 16th June 2006. Submissions can also be made via the Bioethics website, www.bioethics.ie

Ends: