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Hospice Care and Planning

ESTATE PLANNING FOR HOSPICE PATIENTS: SET YOUR SIGHTS HIGH, NOT LOW

Hospice patients have an important advantage when it comes to estate planning. Unlike most people who undertake that important legal process, they pretty much know what their circumstances will be at the time their estate plans are carried out.

Too often, that advantage is wasted because hospice patients, and their families, set their sights too low. It shouldn't be that way.

Estate planning isn't just "something else that ought to be taken care of." It offers tremendous opportunities. From that perspective, let's look at what a hospice patient who sets his or her sights high can expect from the estate planning process.

An Open and Helping Hand. Whenever we receive a call from or on behalf of a hospice patient, the caller's tone seems to assume that we are being asked to do some tremendous favor, and that "given the limited amount of time," it would be inappropriate to ask us to do more than meet simple, basic needs.

That's just not the case. We are an elder law and estate planning law firm. We *want* to help. It's an honor and a privilege to be given the opportunity to do what we do best, especially when people choose to call on us in a time of immediate need. When you call us, forget the time constraints and just expect that we'll do our very best work for you.

Fast Turn-Around Times. We have more ways to communicate information to and from our clients than ever before. Cell phones make it possible to reach family members who may be assisting in the process just about anywhere and any time. Documents don't need to be delivered or mailed to us for review; in most cases, they can be faxed over. Computers make it possible to quickly personalize even long and sophisticated documents. And e-mail makes it possible to get them to a client to be signed almost as soon as they have been completed.

Control Over End-of-Life Decisions. You can make your wishes known through documents like a living will, health care directive and a "do not resuscitate" order. You can also give someone chosen by you the authority necessary through a health care power of attorney. Well thought out documents like "The Five Wishes" are available to help guide you through this process.

The Ability to Take Care of Business, The Right Way. You want to be sure that somebody can do more on your behalf than just write checks. You want to be sure somebody has the authority to do whatever it might take to handle your financial affairs – including being able to dispute any improper bills, to apply for any assistance for which you may be eligible, and to help put your estate plan into action. You can accomplish those important goals through a comprehensive and personalized power of attorney for property.

Avoiding Probate. Probate is a legal process that involves substantial delay and expense in getting the estate of someone who dies into the hands of the people who will inherit it. The good news is that you can avoid it through proper planning. Even in hospice situations, there is usually enough time, unless you wait until the last minute to get started. But two important steps need to be completed. First, the right documents need to be put into place. Second, assets need to be retitled, and beneficiary designations need to be added or changed, as may be necessary in order to put your plan into place.

Planning That Makes a Real Difference. With the right estate planning, you can not only choose which loved ones (and perhaps charities) will inherit your estate, you can make sure your estate gets there intact and that it does the most possible good. You can see to it that nothing is wasted on avoidable taxes or expenses. You can protect inheritances from creditor claims, and make sure they are managed properly for beneficiaries who may need that help and protection, such as children, those with special needs, and those who might otherwise blow their entire inheritance as soon as they received it.

Peace of Mind. The most important benefit of putting a good estate plan into place is the peace of mind it brings. It can truly be one of the most comforting and satisfying steps in a hospice patient's journey toward the end of this life. Your family members can unite in support of accomplishing your goals, rather than perhaps arguing over what you "would have wanted." You can be assured that not only will things go smoothly, they will be handled the way you want. And you will know that you have provided for your loved ones, to the very best of your ability and in a caring and thoughtful way.

Ask the Expert . . .

MISPERCEPTIONS OF HOSPICE

By Hospice Foundation of America
Courtesy of Family Hospice

Perception: Hospice is where you go when there is "nothing else to be done."

HFA Response: Hospice is the "something more" that can be done for the patient and the family when the illness cannot be cured. It is a concept based on comfort-oriented care. Referral into hospice is a movement into another mode of therapy, which may be more appropriate for terminal care.

Perception: Families should be isolated from a dying patient.

HFA Response: Hospice staff believe that when family members (including children) experience the dying process in a caring environment, it helps counteract the fear of their own mortality and the mortality of their loved ones.

Perception: Hospice care is more expensive than conventional medical care.

HFA Response: Studies have shown hospice care to be no more costly. Frequently it is less expensive than conventional care in the last six months of life. Less high-cost technology is used, and family, friends and volunteers provide 90 percent of the day-to-day patient care at home.

Would you like to be added to our mailing list for *Hospice Care and Planning* or be a guest columnist? If so, please contact our Director of Community Education and Outreach, Beth Frame, at (314) 567-9292 or (618) 659-9292, or email to beth@coulsonlawgroup.com to be included.

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Multidisciplinary Approach to Pain Benefits End-Stage Cancer Patients

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) Dec 28 - For most patients with advanced cancer, a multidisciplinary approach to pain management effectively controls pain, according to recent findings.

"Pain is a prevalent and potentially debilitating symptom in patients with cancer, ultimately playing a central role in the quality of life of many patients," Dr. Wen Ling Peng, of the Koo Foundation Sun Yat-Sen Cancer Center, Taipei, Taiwan, and colleagues write in the November issue of the *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*. "About 50% of all cancer patients and 70% of patients with advanced cancer have pain."

The researchers include 772 cancer patients in their retrospective study. Overall, 669 of the 772 patients (87%) suffered from pain at some point. Only 103 patients (13%) were free of pain throughout their survival periods.

The mean duration of pain was 6.9 months. The prevalence of pain increased as the survival time shortened, according to the authors. The prevalence of pain was 28%, 46%, 67%, 75%, and 79% at 6 months, 3 months, 1 month, 1 week, and 1 day before the time of death, respectively. Thirty-two percent of subjects had experienced severe pain at some point, and 24% suffered moderate pain.

The investigators report that 79% of the patients received non-surgical antineoplastic treatments for pain control. Of the 669 patients with pain, 85% had been treated with "strong" opioids. The number of patients experiencing pain in the last 6 months of life increased as they progressed through the end stage of cancer.

"Using multidisciplinary pain management, the majority of these patients had their pain become mild to none (pain score 0 to 4), and the number with substantial pain (pain score 5 to 10) ranged from 1% (at 6 months) to 11% (at 1 week before death)," Dr. Peng's team reports.

"We conclude that the application of a multidisciplinary approach to pain management offers effective pain control for most patients with advanced cancer," the team writes.

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