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## George Wolfe and Ann Carney Pomper: Making your health care wishes known

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"Certainty?" quipped Benjamin Franklin. "In this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes."

He would have appreciated the juxtaposition of two April dates this year: April 15, when our taxes are always due, and the first-ever National Healthcare Decisions Day on April 16.

National Healthcare Decisions Day, jointly sponsored by 65 national health care, legal and religious organizations, is designed to spark conversations about what each of us wants to happen if we reach a point where we cannot communicate or make decisions about health care ourselves.

Nationally, only 25 percent of adults have specific written instructions in place that would specify their health care wishes when they cannot speak for themselves. The figures are higher for Santa Cruz County, but not high enough. In part, our local progress stems from an initiative jointly sponsored by the Health Improvement Partnership our local countywide collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders, the Hospice of Santa Cruz County and the Santa Cruz County End-of-Life Coalition.

Called "Make Your Wishes Known," the local campaign works through physicians and others to echo the messages of the national Healthcare Decisions Day: make your health care wishes known for your own sake and for the sake of your loved ones. Doing so not only gives individuals more dignity at the end of life, but also reduces community-wide health care costs incurred by expensive, and often unwanted, medical interventions that do not change the patient's outcome or comfort.

The Terry Schiavo case in 2005 is just one example of the pain that families go through when relatives disagree about what an incapacitated person would have wanted. Ms. Schiavo, who was 41 when she died, surely did not feel that setting forth her end-of-life health care wishes had any urgency at that age, yet accidents and severe medical events can strike at any time.

The tools for making your wishes known are surprisingly simple and straightforward. You don't need a lawyer and there are no fees or wrong answers. The relevant forms -- called Advance Directives -- are easy to fill out. Advance Directives clarify the care or treatment you would want if you were seriously injured or ill and also name someone to speak for you, if you can't speak for yourself. Locally, Make Your Wishes Known provides free forms and information see box for their Web site and phone number. Hospice staff and volunteers also

**FOR MORE INFORMATION OR**

to download an Advance Directive form:

- Make Your Wishes Known (forms and advice in English or Spanish): 831-469-6222, [www.makeyourwishesknown.org](http://www.makeyourwishesknown.org)
- Hospice of Santa Cruz County (advice and volunteers to speak to groups): 831-430-3000, [www.hospicesantacruz.org](http://www.hospicesantacruz.org)
- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (forms for other states): [www.caringinfo.org](http://www.caringinfo.org)

offer free workshops about the process to community groups or other gatherings. For example, interested employers could sponsor workshops for staff, book or volunteer groups could do the same, and of course anyone could bring together family and friends for a discussion.

In our roles as a physician and as the director of Hospice of Santa Cruz County, we are both aware of unnecessary family tragedies unfolding at the bedsides of people whose lives are ending. Death is a difficult topic; this prevents many of us from even broaching the subject with those closest to us. With Advance Directives in place, we can create some peace of mind about our final days and hours with at least some assurance that our own health-care decisions will be honored and not made by a stranger who happens to be on duty, or perhaps by a distant relative who thinks he or she knows what we would have wanted, but in fact does not.

We urge all adults, young and old, to think about the types of health care they do and do not want at the end of life, to clarify those wishes in an Advance Directive, and to name both an agent and an alternate agent who can express those wishes in case they are unable to do so themselves.

Filling out Advance Directives is easy, but they won't do any good if they are filed away or hidden in a security box that no one knows about. Once you've filled out the forms, let your loved ones and your doctor know, and keep copies in an accessible place.

If you'd like more information about Advance Directives, contact any of the organizations listed in the box. Now that your taxes are filed, go ahead and make 2008 the year you take this simple, effective step to let the person who really knows your wishes best -- you -- make these decisions now, so that you and your loved ones will not struggle with them when they are most needed.

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