

Kathleen Martin is an attorney with O'Donnell, Weiss & Mattei, P.C., and a newspaper columnist for The Mercury, which gave permission for this article to be reprinted.

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The promise to never put me in a nursing home

We have all heard of families that have a loved one who extracts the promise to “never put me in a nursing home.” We may have made that promise ourselves. Sometimes it is the ill person who told family members that is what he or she wanted. Other times it is the caregiver thinking of what he or she *thinks* that the loved one would want. *The New York Times*, in a recent article, published a physician’s reflection on hard cases and when to ignore the promise to “never put me in a nursing home.” http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/09/when-to-ignore-a-promise-to-never-put-me-in-a-home/?em-pos=smail&emc=edit_my_201511.

The article starts by describing a new patient admitted to the hospital who had a deep and infected bedsore over a large portion of her back. This woman had severe dementia, and had become bedbound. Her family was following her express wishes while she was well that they were to keep her home and never send her to a nursing home. Unfortunately, the family was unable to provide the care that their mother needed, struggling but failing to keep ahead of the sore on her back and shoulder.

Dr. Zuger and her colleagues feel that the example above is an example of what happens when the “present self” tries to direct the “future self’s” care. It may seem obvious what to do and what to request from your loved ones when one is relatively healthy but aging. There is an old Mexican proverb that says “the appearance of the bull changes when you are in ring.” It might be easy to say today that your children or spouse should care for you at home, and it might be their best intentions to do so, but one’s control over the future is tenuous at best.

The favored advice today is to name an agent, someone they can trust to evaluate the situation at the time, weigh all options and assist in making decisions if the ill person is not able to understand or communicate. The agent should know what the patient would want, and not to follow blindly directions given years before. However, it is still difficult since the patient might have said do this, and now “this” is not what they need or would even want if they understood enough to say.

The article refers to a 2014 New York State Lottery advertisement showing an older man recalling that as a youth he almost bought a deck of cards instead of the lottery ticket that made him wealthy. The announcer pointed out that “present you’ can be awfully selfish, with a deplorable tendency to overlook the best financial interests of ‘future you.’” The article goes on to say that “present you” can be decisive and “perhaps a little cruel” rejecting all life sustaining measures in the absence of intellect. “Present you” can only imagine the future and sometimes the directives you give in the present are not what the “future you” wants or needs.

Remember that when you are giving those stern directives now that you should give your healthcare agent some “wobble room” in the future. As a caregiver, whether spouse, child or other, what your loved one may have said in the past does not mean that you need to follow their directions to the letter if those directions are not reasonable or no longer apply.