

Quality of Life

If you're like most people, you probably don't spend much time thinking about how you'd like to live the last days of your life. For many of us, death is an uncomfortable subject—perhaps because it reminds us of our own mortality. Yet it's a subject that deserves your attention, particularly in light of advances in medical technology over the past few decades.

No One Can Define Your Quality of Life But You

Today, a variety of medical treatment options are available if you're seriously ill or injured. The choices you and your doctor make about treatment may result in a completely different lifestyle than you had before. That's where quality-of-life issues come into play.

Fact is, each person has an idea of what constitutes quality of life based on beliefs and values like family, independence, spirituality, mobility and mental capacity. It's important to consider how *you* define quality of life for *yourself* should the need arise to choose medical treatment and make end-of-life decisions.

The following cases may help you examine your own quality-of-life values.

Case #1: Mrs. Lee

Mrs. Lee, a 48-year-old wife and mother, was admitted to the intensive care unit with pain in her right side. She also had trouble breathing.

The Second in a Series of Six Bulletins

Feel free to share this and the other Decisions bulletins with your loved ones and doctors.

1. **The changing role of medicine and our changing view of death**



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3. **How to communicate your decision with loved ones**
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The way you define quality of life can determine the choices you may have to make regarding your own end of life.

Her doctors found she had a recurrence of lung cancer that was incurable. As Mrs. Lee's breathing got worse, the physicians talked with her about treatment options.

With no further treatment, her breathing problems would hasten her death. She could leave the hospital and receive supportive care at home. Or she could be attached to a breathing machine, an option that would let her live several days or weeks longer even though she'd be completely dependent on the ventilator. With both options, her doctors promised to help her breathe and ease her pain with medication.

Mrs. Lee decided to use the ventilator, knowing that she would live her last days in the hospital and eventually die with a breathing tube in place as the cancer progressed.

Imagine yourself in Mrs. Lee's position. What treatment choice would you make? What values influenced your decision? Would you rather remain in the hospital or receive supportive care at home? If you were unable to speak for yourself, would a family member or a close friend know what decision to make for you?

Case #2: Mr. Miller

Mr. Miller, a very active 62 year old, had sudden and severe abdominal pain while golfing. He was rushed to the hospital where doctors found a large blood vessel had ruptured, causing internal bleeding. Mr. Miller was admitted to the ICU. Over the next several days, complications from his initial loss of

blood and extremely low blood pressure resulted in kidney damage and loss of circulation to his left leg.

Mr. Miller was unconscious and remained on a breathing machine.

His doctors talked with his wife about her husband's poor potential for full recovery. They felt Mr. Miller could eventually breathe on his own. But because there was minimal blood flow to his brain before the emergency surgery and he continued to be unresponsive, they could not say for sure that he would regain full mental functioning. The doctors also informed Mrs. Miller that her husband would have to undergo amputation of his left leg and kidney dialysis two or three times a week.

If you were Mr. Miller, how would you feel about your dramatically changed lifestyle? What effect would losing a limb, undergoing regular dialysis or having reduced mental functioning have on your lifestyle? Given your values about quality of life, what treatment would you choose? Would your family or a close friend know what medical decision you'd want made if you were incapacitated like Mr. Miller? What should Mrs. Miller do?

Consider now how you define quality of life.

Next Bulletin: ③ ***How to communicate your values***

Telling your loved ones about your end-of-life decisions.

Written by a diverse group of healthcare professionals and clergy dedicated to informing the public about end-of-life decisions.