A LEGACY OF BITTERNESS
THE LESSON FROM TERRY SCHIAVO

October 2003

You no doubt have read of the tragic story of Terry Schiavo, the young woman in Florida who was severely brain damaged as a consequence of a heart attack. She has survived in a vegetative state for some nine years and is currently being kept alive through the use of a feeding tube.

Her husband says that she told him that she never wanted to be kept alive through artificial means, but she never put these wishes in writing and she never authorized anyone to make decisions for her in the event she was unable to do so herself. Her husband has petitioned the court to honor her stated wishes, as he understands them. Her parents and siblings, who have never heard her state any such wishes, have opposed this action. After years of court action, the Florida’s highest court ruled that the feeding tube could be removed. Florida’s legislature intervened, passing a law that authorized the state’s governor to order the feeding tube to be reattached, which he did.

The second tragedy of this event is that the people she loved now hate each other. This part of the tragedy could have been avoided if she had executed an Advance Directive for Health Care. This is a legal document that authorizes a person or persons you select to make health care decisions on your behalf if you are unable to do so. This document has a place where you can indicate the circumstances under which you want care to be provided and when (or if) it should be withheld. The person you name as your agent is responsible for making sure your wishes are carried out.

If you do not have signed an Advanced Health Care Directive or some similar document, then any of the following are ways you can get this accomplished:

- Call the attorney who prepared your will or living trust. This person can easily and inexpensively prepare this document for you.
- Contact Partnership for Caring at 800-989-9455. For a nominal fee, they will send you the proper for your state with instructions for completing it.
- Contact the Hospice Foundation for the Central Coast at 831-333-9023. They have an excellent document called Five Wishes that is free.

Once you have completed your Advance Directive for Health Care make copies of it for your loved ones and place a copy with your other important documents. Call a family meeting and discuss your end-of-life wishes so there will be no misunderstanding.
should the time come. Then review this document every couple of years to make sure it still represents your wishes. Lastly, ask your loved ones if they have done the same for themselves and make sure they do so if they have not already.

Terry Schiavo probably didn’t get around to writing her wishes down because she was young, and figured she had lots of time to deal with the issue. Unfortunately she was wrong, and the unintentional result for her family is a legacy of bitterness and anger. Don’t let that be your legacy. Make a phone call right now.