

Dear Abby

by Abigail Van Buren

Widower Regrets Not Having Living Will Handy at Hospital

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DEAR ABBY: I would like to address a problem I've never seen in your column. A lot of people have living wills but most don't remember what's in them.

My wife went to the hospital for a routine procedure that required anesthesia. After three hours of what was supposed to be a one-hour procedure, a nurse came out, said there was "a problem" and took me back to the recovery room. My wife was writhing on the bed and kept rasping, "I can't breathe!" Six nurses tried to put an oxygen mask over her face, but she kept fighting them, trying to rip it off. I was in total shock.

I didn't know how to help her, so I asked the anesthesiologist standing there to do something, and he said her living will was a DNR (do not resuscitate). She remained in cardiac and respiratory distress for eight hours before a pulmonologist was mercifully called and she was put on a ventilator.

I went home and pulled out our living wills. Hers stated, and I quote, "the individual so named must be terminally ill or permanently unconscious." I had no idea. She was neither of those things. If I'd had a copy of the living will *with* me, I'm sure she would have immediately been put on a ventilator. I lost her six months later, on Christmas morning.

I urge everyone who goes to the hospital for any procedure to make sure the person accompanying them has a copy of their advance directive. I still feel guilty. Her outcome could have been so much different, and she might have lived much longer. -- GRIEVING HUSBAND

DEAR GRIEVING HUSBAND: Please accept my deepest sympathy for the loss of your wife. Suffering as much pain as you are over her death, please don't torture yourself further over what you "would have, could have, should have" done. I appreciate your taking the time to share this important information with me and my readers. Your letter serves as a reminder that all end-of-life documents should be reviewed regularly to be sure they reflect current thinking. Thank you.