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How to Be Your Own Healthcare Advocate

Because No One Knows You Better… Than You

A 2016 Johns Hopkins study revealed that medical errors are the third leading cause of death in the U.S., however, research shows that people who are actively involved in making decisions about their medical care recover more quickly when they're sick, and live longer and healthier lives. So how can you become your own healthcare advocate?

Start by doing some research. Consult reputable online sources and talk to friends or family members who have dealt with similar issues. While no amount of personal research can match the skills and knowledge of an experienced healthcare provider, it can prepare you to have a meaningful conversation.

Doing your own background work can also prepare you to ask smart questions. Use what you've learned to inquire about the pros and cons of a procedure or course of treatment, potential side effects, alternative methods of treatment, and what you can do to ensure the outcome is as positive as possible. While it may seem uncomfortable, you can ask about the costs as well.

Determine what your insurance will and will not cover. A healthcare provider's job is to recommend a plan of treatment they believe will work for you and your ailment. This means some treatment options may not always be affordable if it's not fully covered by your insurance. Always weigh the medical, as well as the financial pros and cons.

Finally, don't be afraid to get a second opinion. Different providers may recommend different methods for treating certain conditions based on their time practicing, experience treating the condition, and other information they have available to them. You may prefer rehabilitation to surgery, or lifestyle changes to medication.

Above all, don't be passive. Take responsibility. After all, it's your health and your life.

How to Create Your Own Advisor Network

Some things in life are better done as a team, and that definitely includes planning for your family's future. Here are some of the key members that can help you navigate the financial and legal waters to ensure your family's needs are taken care of, even after you're gone.

1. **Financial planner.** While you could take Warren Buffett's advice and simply invest all your savings in an Exchange Traded Fund (ETF), a certified financial planner can ensure you make the right financial decisions for your individual and family needs.
2. **Insurance agent.** Just in case the worst thing does happen, insurance can add liquidity and flexibility to your estate plan.
3. **Real estate agent.** Even if you don't plan to move, an agent can provide advice, guidance, and recommendations for contractors, landscapers, and things you might consider to increase the value of your home in the meantime.
4. **Estate planning attorney.** A comprehensive estate plan helps protect and provide for your family both now and after you're gone. Safeguarding beneficiaries, protecting assets, shepherding your family's future, providing for loved ones with special needs, and ensuring your intentions are carried out.

Isn't it time you started building your advisor network?

Sleep Deprivation Won't Just Leave You Tired

It Can Also Dramatically Affect Your Health

If you don't get enough sleep, you may be among the roughly 50 million to 70 million Americans who suffer from chronic sleep disorders that decrease daily functioning and adversely affect health and longevity. In fact, one study found that not getting enough sleep carries a greater mortality risk than smoking, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

We have recently learned there's another reason to focus on improving your sleeping habits: Research shows that chronic sleep problems may be linked to Alzheimer's Disease.

Poor sleep is linked to greater levels of amyloid protein build-up in the brain, and amyloid plaque levels are linked to Alzheimer's. Studies show that even in cases where people sleep eight hours a day, but as fragmented naps, the consequences are much different from those who sleep eight hours through the night. Researchers studied older adults and found that "people with preclinical Alzheimer's Disease had more fragmentation in their circadian activity patterns, with more periods of inactivity or sleep during the day and more periods of activity at night."

In other words, sleep problems were associated with early stages of Alzheimer's. If you often feel tired, or experience frequent mood changes, difficulty concentrating, and/or memory lapses, it might be time to start changing your sleep habits.

Your body and your mind will thank you for it.

Estate Planning for Blended Families

How to Avoid Unintended Consequences

When bestselling author Tom Clancy passed away in 2013, his estate was worth $86 million. He left $57.5 million to his widow and $28.5 million to his four children from his first marriage. But while Clancy's spouse inherited two-thirds of the estate, she did not have to pay any of the $11.8 million in estate taxes. Instead, the 41 percent tax hit was owed by the trust he set up for his children.

The children disagreed and filed suit arguing that estate taxes should be shared equally between the two estates. A judge disagreed, however, ruling that the taxes should be paid by the children, the remainder beneficiaries.

Sound complicated? Where a blended family (your version of the "Brady Bunch") is concerned, it can be. Not only must you decide how to divide financial assets, you also need to decide who will pay any taxes due on your estate.

For example, say you're remarried and have children from a previous marriage. You set up a trust for your spouse and name your children as residual beneficiaries of that trust after your spouse passes away. Who will pay the estate taxes on that trust? You could have the residual beneficiaries bear the tax burden; by law the surviving spouse has the right to be reimbursed by the trust unless that reimbursement is waived. If the beneficiaries of your spouse are the same, waiving recovery results in a lower overall tax.

Contrast that with a first marriage situation: If the family is not blended, then waiving the reimbursement creates a better financial result. Plus, ultimately all of the assets stay within the first marriage family.

The key is to think beyond, "who will get what?" and also consider, "who will pay what?" It's easy to focus solely on who will inherit what and when: Do you want your children to wait until their stepparent passes away before they inherit any assets, or do you wish to split the assets upon your death? (And then possibly have any assets remaining at your spouse's death pass to your children?)

Those decisions can result in different financial repercussions for individual family members and also have different tax repercussions, especially where retirement accounts are concerned.

Blended families can make estate planning more complicated while also increasing the possibility of unintended consequences. Make sure your estate plan is designed to reduce the amount of estate tax, as well as takes into consideration who will be responsible for paying any tax that might be due.

Can You Guess this Legacy?

While she may be best-known for playing the mother of a blended family, this actress, singer, and dancer first gained acclaim as the originator of the lead role in the Broadway musical "Fanny." She later worked in TV and film, hosted several cooking shows, and was even the first female guest host of the "Tonight Show."

Yet she will also be remembered as a tireless advocate for causes like City of Hope, Speaking of Women, and the Sisters of St. Benedict in Ferdinand, Indiana, some of whose nuns had been her teachers.

While Carol Brady of "The Brady Bunch" serves as an iconic stepmother, Florence Henderson transcended that role to make a professional and personal impact on the lives of many.

What will your legacy be?

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