
AGING WITH DIGNITY

September 20, 2007

Thomas Bowman
Chief of Staff
Office of the Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington DC 20420

Dear Mr. Bowman:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and your colleagues yesterday regarding the use of advance directives within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Jim Towey and I appreciated the chance to share the experiences of Aging with Dignity and learn how the VA approaches planning for the end of life.

At the close of our discussion yesterday, Ellen Fox provided a sample of the VA's new publication "*Your Life, Your Choices*" (June 11, 2007) for our review. This 100-page document includes the VA Advance Directive Form 10-0137, in addition to 33 pages of worksheets to be completed by veterans and their families, as well as other supplementary information.

I should begin by acknowledging that many well-intentioned experts have different opinions regarding which style and format is most effective for an advance directive. It is not my intention to critique style or to promote the use of any single document. I convey the following observations because I believe the material provided to us yesterday represents a deeply flawed approach to advance care planning that is dangerous for America's 24 million veterans.

- Compassion and Choices is the one and only organization listed under the headline "advance directives" in the resources section at the back of this publication (page 99). Compassion and Choices is more commonly known as the Hemlock Society, a proponent of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.
- The publication's focus on "quality of life" is disturbing and consistent with a vision of the end of life that sees assisted suicide as a viable and moral option. Questions like the one on page 9 ("What does "being a vegetable" mean to you?") set the tone for the VA's approach to end-of-life care that would be concerning to many. The Quality of Life worksheet on page 31 describes several possible scenarios and asks veterans to decide if life in this condition would be *difficult but acceptable, barely worth living, or not worth living*. These conditions include everything from requiring a wheelchair, to losing bladder control, to not being able to "shake the blues."
- Most state laws include so-called "trigger conditions" that limit the situations under which life support treatment may be withheld or withdrawn based on a written directive. These triggers are in place to safeguard the vulnerable – those who may feel like a burden, are dependant on others for basic care, and may feel pressured to "do the decent thing and die." For the VA to ask veterans to consider discontinuing life support

P.O. Box 1661, Tallahassee, FL 32302-1661
Phone: (850) 681-2010 Fax: (850) 681-2481

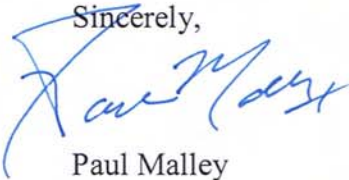
Web site: www.agingwithdignity.org Email: fivewishes@agingwithdignity.org

treatment for those who have a “*permanent condition that makes me completely dependent on others for my daily needs (for example, eating, bathing, toileting)*,” could be interpreted as an effort to cut costs and deny care.

We have great respect for all the VA is doing as the largest integrated health system in the world to provide quality care to those in need. I would be remiss if I did not say that asking fragile, sick, and disabled individuals to navigate a 100-page document is completely out of touch with what is effective on the ground. Aging with Dignity has been promoting advance care planning for more than 10 years, and I can tell you that the VA’s newly published approach is fatally flawed.

Thank you for meeting with us yesterday and for the opportunity to voice these concerns. If I can be of any assistance to you or your staff, please do not hesitate to contact me at 850-681-2010, Ext. 103

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Paul Malley". The signature is stylized and written over the word "Sincerely,".

Paul Malley
President