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By Nora Lockwood Tooher
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Schiavo Case Triggers Avalanche Of Interest In Advance Directives

Joe B. Whisler knows first-hand the agony a family goes through when a loved one hasn't left an advance directive for care and end of life decisions.

Several years ago, his mother-in-law, who had Alzheimer's disease, broke her hip and went into a persistent vegetative state. His wife and one other siblings clashed over whether their mother should be put on life support.

"My wife and I both believe this wasn't the way she would have wanted to go out of this world, but she didn't have a health care directive," he said.

As a result, Whisler said, "she lingered for another two years, rolled up in a ball."

She died in 2002.

"It caused a real schism in my wife's family," he added. "And it's so preventable."

That's why Whisler has made it his mission as president of the Missouri Bar Association to get the word out to the public about the importance of advance directives- the umbrella term for living wills, health care proxies and health care powers of attorney.

The Missouri Bar Association's website-www.mobar.org- contains links that allow members of the public to download durable powers of attorney for health care and health care directive forms.

The response has been tremendous.

From 11 a.m., Tuesday, March 22, through 9 a.m. Monday, March 28, the site received 16,983 hits, according to Missouri Bar Association spokesman Gary Toohey.

The Terri Schiavo case in Florida has triggered an outpouring of interest by the public in advance directives, according to elder law and estate planning attorneys.

Schiavo was 26 years old when a heart stoppage caused severe brain damage 15 years ago. She died on March 31 following a prolonged legal battle between her husband and her parents about whether to remove her feeding tube.

She did not have a living will or health care proxy.

Estate planning and elder law attorneys say they have been flooded with calls from clients seeking to avoid the legal war waged by Schiavo's parents and her husband over her care.

"The phone has been ringing off the hook," said Bernard A. Krooks, an elder law attorney with Littman Krooks in Manhattan and White Plains, N.Y.

"People are becoming more and more aware how critical these documents are," he said.

Whisler agreed.