

Advance Healthcare Directives

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WHAT are they

All adults have the right to make decisions about the nature of medical services they will receive in their final days. They may accept or refuse medical treatment as part of their right to self-determination.

Unfortunately, many people neglect to think about these matters until too late, when they can no longer make sound decisions, are unable to articulate their wishes, or are under too much duress to reason clearly.

The advance healthcare directive is a powerful tool from which all adults can benefit. It is a legal record of an individual's preferences regarding end-of-life medical care. In fact, across the country most hospitals are requiring an advance directive when a patient is admitted.

Individuals can change their advance directive at any time, since it takes effect only when and if they become incapacitated.

Interestingly, while about 75% of Americans support the use of advance directives, only 18% to 35% actually write them. Even more startling, of that smaller percentage, about one-third are unable to find the directive when they need it.¹

WHICH issues to consider

Though certain information must be included in an advance healthcare directive, there is no universal form. For example, a basic directive may only designate a proxy to carry out a person's medical wishes. On the other hand, it may specify precisely which medical situations and treatment alternatives one would like — or like to avoid. These may include:

- Cardiopulmonary resuscitation
- Mechanical breathing
- Major surgery
- Dialysis
- Blood transfusion
- Organ donation
- Diagnostic testing
- Hospice or home health
- Administration of pain medication

Ask Your Patients...

"Do you know about advance healthcare directives and why they're important to you?"

If Your Patient Asks...

"Who should get a copy of my advance directive?"

HOW to proceed

There are two separate phases of establishing an advance directive, and both are crucial; while the specific process may vary depending on individual preferences, one must be sure not just to prepare the directive, but also to distribute it.

Before

- Research types of advance directives, state requirements, etc.
- Choose a proxy to make healthcare decisions
- Consult with family, friends, physician, attorney and others

After

- Arrange for a witness to sign it
- Keep a list of all those who receive a copy
- Put a copy into one's wallet and glove compartment
- If there are revisions to the document, give updated versions to everyone on the recipient list:
 - Family members
 - Healthcare providers
 - Legal advisors
 - Other care providers
 - A proxy, if they have one

A person's preferences may be general: "I do not want 'heroic measures' if I am not expected to recover." Or they may be highly detailed: "If I have a terminal illness with only weeks to live, and my mind is not clear enough that I can make my own decisions, yet I am conscious and aware, then I request the following specific measures, if medically reasonable ..."²

WHERE to find more information

Aging with Dignity "Five Wishes"

<http://www.agingwithdignity.org/five-wishes>

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

<http://www.nhpco.org>
703.837.1500

American Bar Association Commission on Law and Aging

http://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_aging.html

National Institute on Aging

<https://www.nia.nih.gov>

LEAD by example

Patients and their families look to you, as their healthcare professional, for guidance in medical matters.

One of the most effective ways to help patients is to serve as a role model. Have you contemplated your own end-of-life wishes? Have you completed an advance directive?

Putting to use the information in this brochure can benefit you and your patients alike. You will have addressed medical issues in your own future, and you will be able to share with your patients your first-hand knowledge of the emotional and logistical aspects of the process.

- 1 Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. Advance Care Planning: Professionals. Available at http://www.compassionandsupport.org/index.php/for_professionals/advanced_care_planning_-_professionals. Last accessed April 15, 2016.
- 2 Emanuel LL, von Gunten CF, Ferris FD (eds). *The Education in Palliative and End-of-Life Care Curriculum*. Chicago, IL: The EPEC Project; 1999.
- 3 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Advance Directives and Advance Care Planning: A Report to Congress. Available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/reports/2008/ADCongRpt.pdf>. Last accessed April 15, 2016.

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