



Illness and End-of-Life Health Care Decision Making

What healthcare choices would your loved one want if unable to speak for him or herself? Communications related to such choices can: a) reduce tension and conflict within the family, b) reduce conflict between the family and health care providers, and c) better reflect your loved one's wishes.

Having that difficult discussion...

Informal Conversations

Family Conversations—please make sure that all needed family members know your loved one's wishes related to future health care and medical decisions.

Formal Documentation

Most states recognize two types of health care decision making documents (advance directives): a **Health Care Power of Attorney** and a **Living Will**.

A **Health Care Power of Attorney** form designates a person to make health care decisions on your behalf; the directive takes effect if your doctor determines that you are unable to make or communicate decisions yourself. The Health Care Power of Attorney form must be notarized by a notary public and requires the signatures of two witnesses who are unrelated to you.

A **Living Will** allows you to express your wishes about life-sustaining treatment should you become terminally or irreversibly ill. When you make a living will, you can state whether you want your life to be prolonged by extraordinary means or by artificial nutrition and hydration if you have a terminal, incurable condition or are in a persistent vegetative state. A living will is simple to fill out. In most states, the signatures of two witnesses (who are not related to you) and a notary public are required. A living will becomes effective when you can no longer direct your health care and are not expected to recover.



NC Advance Health Care Directive Registry

The North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State has established a registry where one may access and file Advance Health Care Directives. They may include the following:

- A health care power of attorney
- A declaration of a desire for a natural death
- An advance instruction for mental health treatment
- A declaration of an anatomical gift

For more information, visit <http://www.secretary.state.nc.us/ahcdr/> or call 919-807-2167.

Asking (and Answering) the Right Questions

When having a discussion about advance care planning, the following questions can be included:

1. Who should speak on your behalf if you become so sick you can't speak for yourself?
2. Are there any circumstances that you've heard about through the news or TV where you've said to yourself, "I would never want to live like that?" If so, what are they and why do you feel this way about them?
3. Are there any life-sustaining treatments that you would not want to receive under any circumstances? If so, what are they and why do you feel this way about them?
4. Some people have more concerns about the way they will die or dying than death itself. Do you have any fears or concerns about this?
5. In the event that you are dying, where do you want to receive medical care?
6. Should your current preferences be strictly applied to future situations or serve as a general guide to your family (or loved ones)?

You might express your wishes in general terms - "Do whatever is necessary for my comfort, but nothing further." Or, "I authorize all measures be taken to prolong my life." You might express desires about the use of specific medical interventions, such as a respirator, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), surgery, and blood transfusions. You could authorize experimental or non-traditional treatment. You should express your wishes concerning food and water administered through tubes.

Where to Put Your Documents

No document will do you any good if it cannot be located when it is needed. Make copies for your loved ones, your health care agent, others who may participate in end of life decisions for you, your doctor, and your hospital record. Do not keep it in a safe deposit box. If you are receiving hospice care, home health care, or are in a nursing home, a copy should be in the office of that agency or facility.

Reference: University of Washington. (1998). Ethics in medicine. Retrieved from <http://depts.washington.edu/bioethx/topics/adcare.html>.



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