

## **ADVANCED CARE DIRECTIVES**

**Definition** - Advanced care directives are specific instructions, prepared in advance, that are intended to direct a person's medical care if he or she becomes unable to do so in the future. These are also referred to as Power of attorney; DNR; Do not resuscitate; and Living wills.

### **Making Your Own Decisions**

Advanced care directives allow patients to make their own decisions regarding the care they would prefer to receive if they develop a terminal illness or a life-threatening injury. Advanced care directives can also designate someone the patient trusts to make decisions about medical care, if the patient becomes unable to make (or communicate) these decisions. Federal law requires hospitals, nursing homes, and other institutions that receive Medicare or Medicaid funds to provide written information regarding advanced care directives to all patients upon admission. Advanced care directives can reduce:

- Personal worry
- Futile, costly, specialized interventions that a patient may not want
- Overall health care costs
- Feelings of helplessness and guilt for family
- Legal concerns for everyone involved

### **Examples of Advanced Directives**

**Verbal instructions.** These are any decisions regarding care that are communicated verbally by an individual to health care providers and family members.

**Organ donation.** This may be accomplished by completing an organ donation card and carrying it in your wallet. A second card may be placed with important papers (such as a living will, insurance papers, and so on). Most hospitals or other major health care centers have organ donor information available. Many states offer people who are applying for new or renewed driver's license the opportunity to make a decision regarding organ donation and have it recorded on the driver's license. More information may be obtained by calling 1-800-24-DONOR.

**Living will.** This is a written, legal document that conveys the wishes of a person in the event of terminal illness. This document can speak for a patient who is unable to communicate. A living will may indicate specific care or treatment the person does or does not want performed under specific circumstances. This may include specific procedures, care, or treatments such as the following:

- [CPR](#) (if cardiac or [respiratory arrest](#) occurs)
- Artificial nutrition through [intravenous](#) or tube feedings
- Prolonged maintenance on a respirator (if unable to breathe adequately alone)
- [Blood cultures](#), spinal fluid evaluations, and other diagnostic tests

- Blood transfusions

**Special medical power of attorney.** A legal document that allows an individual to appoint someone else (proxy) to make medical or health care decisions, in the event the individual becomes unable to make or communicate such decisions personally. This document provides for power to make medically related decisions only and does not give any individual power to make legal or financial decisions.

**DNR (do not resuscitate) order.** This states that CPR (cardio pulmonary resuscitation) is not to be performed if your breathing stops or your heart stops beating. The order may be written by the person's doctor after discussing the issue with the person (if possible), the proxy, or family.

### **Facts to Remember**

- In the event you choose to write up a living will or special medical power of attorney, know specific state laws that may apply. Write the document to be consistent with your state's laws.
- If you have a living will or special medical power of attorney, provide copies for your family members and health care providers. Carry a copy with you in a wallet, glove compartment of car, or similar location. If you have a planned admission to a hospital, take copies for the hospital to include in your medical chart and tell all medical personnel involved with your case about the documents.
- Consider the possibilities of the future, and plan ahead. Studies have shown that although the majority of people believe having some form of advance directives is a good idea, most people have not actually developed advance directives for themselves. Many people state that they want their families to make health care decisions. However, less than half of these people have ever discussed the issue and their specific desires with family members.
- These decisions can be changed at any time. However, if a living will is changed, everyone involved -- including family or proxies and all healthcare providers -- must be informed and new copies of instructions made and distributed.

The process of creating advanced care directives may be difficult. It requires you to think about your priorities regarding quality of life and your death. Treatment options, and their possible influence on your quality of life, need to be fully understood and considered. Know the potential implications of choosing or refusing specific forms of care.

Discuss your wishes regarding advanced care directives with your health care providers, family members, and friends. Review your wishes from time to time to remind everyone.