



Honoring Choices[®] Virginia

Planning in Advance for Future Health Care Choices

Advance Care Planning Information & Guide



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Imagine...You are in an intensive care unit of a hospital. Without warning, you have a life-threatening illness. Despite the best medical treatment, your physicians believe that it is unlikely you will leave the hospital alive. You are no longer able to interact with anyone. At this point, your heartbeat and respiration can be prolonged for some time through continued use of artificial life support. What would your goals be for medical treatment?

You make choices on a daily basis—choices about where you want to live, whom you want to marry—your career, your home, your life.

Perhaps one of the most important choices facing you is your choice for future medical care.

Who decides when enough is enough?

You do. Or at least you should.

You should decide about the kind of care you want while you are capable of making your own decisions.

Technology today has advanced to a point where patients with little or no hope of recovery can be kept alive indefinitely. For that reason, it's more important than ever for people to express how they feel, and what kind of care they would want if they would become unable to make their own decisions.

Think about the kind of treatment you want, and talk about it with your loved ones and your healthcare provider. Talking about these issues may not be easy; there may be resistance, even denial. Many people are uncomfortable talking about living at the end of life.

Yet putting loved ones in the position of having to make decisions for you can be difficult. Discussing your choices now can help.

Talk about the kind of care you want and then put it in writing.

Glossary

Antibiotics - Drugs used to fight infection (pneumonia, for example).

Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation - A medical procedure involving external chest compression, administration of drugs, and electrical shock, used in an effort to restore the heartbeat.

Dialysis - A dialysis machine is used to cleanse the blood when the kidneys cannot function normally.

Intravenous (IV) Line - A tube placed in a vein that is used to administer fluids, blood or medication.

Nutritional Support and Hydration - Using IVs or tubes to supply food (nutrients) or water when a patient is unable to eat or drink.

Ventilator - A breathing machine attached to a tube that is placed into your windpipe, for persons unable to breathe on their own.

Imagine... You have suffered severe, permanent brain injury. You are totally unconscious of your environment, yourself and others. It is not expected that you will regain any consciousness. With proper medical and nursing care, your heart and other vital organs can be maintained for an indefinite period of time – years or even decades. (Such a condition is called a persistent vegetative state which may be caused by trauma to the head or lack of blood flow to the brain.) What would your goals be for medical treatment?

Gifts we can give our loved ones

It occurred to me that my mother gave me a very loving and insightful gift in my life—namely, careful direction about what to do when she became irreversibly ill and unable to make her own decisions.

During the time in our lives when we are able to discuss this issue, it seemed so far off, but within a few years she was the victim of Alzheimer's disease. The issue then became very difficult to discuss because of the impairment in her ability to make judgments, decisions, and understand the complexity of her situation. It was necessary, at this point, to become her advocate and rely on the direction she had given me.

The first experience in decision-making occurred when the doctor discussed the “no resuscitation” issue with me.

“We need to know what your mother's choice would be if her heart should stop,” he stated. She had prepared me for this—the answer was clearly not to initiate resuscitation. There were not many other illnesses along the way that required much decision-making which was fortunate for us. But I do think I would have known what she wanted and acted accordingly.

I lost my mom on April 30—not to Alzheimer's disease, but heart failure.

Amidst the sadness, there was peace. Peace in knowing that many times she had said to me, “No medical intervention when there's nothing that can be done for me.” I am grateful that I didn't have to struggle with decisions during that time.

Knowing the Language

Advance Care Planning

This is a process of coming to understand, reflect on, discuss and plan for a time when you cannot make your own medical decisions and are unlikely to recover from your injury or illness. Effective planning is the best way to make sure your views are respected by your loved ones and health providers. This process also will provide great comfort to those who may make end-of-life decisions for you. Good advance care planning improves the quality of your advance directive.

Advance Directives

Advance directives are the plans you make for your future healthcare decisions in the event you cannot make these decisions for yourself. An advance directive can be completed orally or in writing.

Putting your plan in writing helps people accurately remember your plan, makes it easier to communicate to health providers who do not know, and provides the possibility for it to be a legal document.

When completing a written advance directive, two major choices exist. The first is to appoint someone else to make your healthcare decisions if you are incapable. This type of document is usually called a power of attorney for healthcare. Typically such a document also allows you to provide written instructions.

The second type of document simply provides a narrow set of instructions about care at the end of life. This document is called a living will. It is also known by other names depending on geographical location.

About Advance Directives:

When is an advance directive used? As long as you are capable of making your own decisions, you remain in control of your own medical care. If you're unable to make your decisions, your plans in the advance directive would guide decision making.

Can my advance directive be changed? Advance directives can be changed at any time, as long as you are capable of making decisions. If you do fill one out, a copy can become part of your medical file.

What if I am injured or become ill when I am away from home? The best way to ensure that you receive the type of care you want is to discuss your choices with the person who will represent you and make sure they have a copy of your advance directive. A wallet card, indicating you have an advance directive, is also available.

What happens in an emergency? In the event of an emergency, life-sustaining measures may be started, possibly before your medical record is available. Treatment can be stopped if it is discovered that it's not what you would have wanted.

Do I have to have a lawyer to complete an advance directive?

No. The law does not require you to have an attorney. The choice is yours.

Commonly Asked Questions

Advance Care Planning

How can I talk about these issues with my family?

Plan for yourself first and let your family know what you want. Tell them you don't want them feeling the burden of making the decisions for you. Then ask them to tell you what they want.

Who do I talk to?

Talk to those who are close to you and most likely to be involved in decision making if you are very ill. Just because you have a close relationship does not necessarily mean you know what your loved one thinks or wants for future medical care.

What would I talk about?

1) Who would make decisions for you and how they would make these decisions? Make sure whomever you choose to represent you not only knows what you want, but is able to make complex decisions in difficult situations.

2) Consider what your goals for medical treatment would be if you had a serious, permanent injury to your brain. How bad would such an injury be for you to say, "Don't use medical treatments to keep me alive in that state." Many people simply say, "Don't keep me alive if I am a vegetable." If you feel that way, can you describe what it would mean to you to "be a vegetable?"

Do I need to talk with my physician?

When possible it is important for you to talk with your physician to make sure your planning is clear, complete, and will be supported by your healthcare providers.

If you were in one of the three imaginary situations on the previous pages, what would your goals be for treatment?

- To prolong your life with medical treatments offered by your physician? These treatments may include an array of medications, surgery, tubes for nutritional support and hydration.
- To make sure you are kept comfortable and maintain the highest level of function possible? Your physician might recommend a wide range of medical approaches. In most instances, comfort can be maintained with medication to control pain.
- In thinking about life-sustaining medical care you are not judging what other people might want in these situations, but what you want.

Reflect on what's important to you.

Lyle Greiner's mother was dying...

As a chaplain, he'd seen death many times, yet with his own mother somehow it was different. The family gathered at her bedside, told stories, prayed, sang hymns and grieved.

"It was a marvelous time of family leave-taking," says this gentle bearded giant of a man who looks as though he could have stepped from the pages of "Little House on the Prairie."

"Mother died on Easter morning, just as the sun was coming up," says Greiner. She'd had a massive brain stroke and all brain activity had ceased. She was 75 years old.

The decisions the Greiners had to make during the days between their mother's stroke and her death are the kinds of choices everyone faces eventually. How long should life support be continued when there is no hope for recovery? And if her heart would stop beating, should there be an attempt to revive her? What would she have wanted?

Greiner works in a hospital and is sensitive to those all-important questions. He hears families asking them all the time. He had, in fact, been talking with his family about recording their advance directives for a year and a half—but they hadn't actually done it.

These are uncomfortable things for some people to talk about under the best of circumstances, add the emotional stress of a critical health situation and it's even more difficult.

People aren't speaking the same language in these critical times, says Greiner. Physicians often talk in clinical language, members of the clergy talk in spiritual language, and family members are too emotionally involved to understand.

Thankfully, Greiner's mother had expressed her wishes to her husband, yet it still took a few days for the family to come to terms with those decisions.

Would an advance directive have helped? "You bet," says Greiner. "Talk about this with your family and then put it in writing."

What if you choose not to have an advance directive?

Without an advance directive, your family physician, hospital, and in some cases a judge, would need to make decisions regarding your future care, should you become unable to make them yourself.

Talk with your doctor...

I had a patient with a serious lung disease. His life consisted of moving from his bed to a nearby chair, and even that would leave him short of breath. We talked about what he would want us to do if his lungs failed. Since it was likely he would be totally dependent on a machine for the rest of his life, he refused to consider it as an option.

His wife understood his decision and was very supportive, and his decision was recorded in his medical record as an advance directive.

Six months later he was brought to the hospital very short of breath, without mechanical support he would clearly die.

The physician on duty asked him what he wanted them to do. He again said he only wanted to be comfortable, he didn't want assistance from mechanical breathing machines. The physician did not know the patient or his family, so she was not sure if a lack of oxygen was affecting his judgment.

The written advance directive in his chart indicated that this decision was carefully considered by him and his family.

His choices were respected by the medical staff and he died according to his wishes. Discussing his medical care in advance, with both his family and physician made his final hours less traumatic.

Talk about your concerns, your fears and your decisions with your own physician. It's critically important.

A Physician's Story

All patients will be asked about their choices.

A law, which took effect in December, 1991, requires healthcare facilities that accept Medicare or Medicaid funding to present patients with information about advance directives on admission to either a hospital or nursing home.

That means if you have to go to the hospital, even for a simple procedure, someone on the staff will ask you if you have filled out an advance directive. They will also provide written information about your right to refuse medical care.

There's no easy way to plan for future healthcare choices.

It's a process that involves thinking and talking about complex and sensitive issues.

The questions that follow will help in the advance care planning process. This is a guide for your own benefit; it's not a test and there are no right or wrong answers. It does not need to be completed all at once. You may use it to share your feelings with healthcare providers, your family and your friends. The answers to these questions will help those you love make choices for you when you cannot make them yourself.

Looking back...

Who we are, what we believe and what we value are all shaped by experiences we have had. Religion, family traditions, jobs and friends affect us deeply.

Has anything happened in your past that shaped your feelings about medical treatment?

Think about an experience you may have had with a family member or friend who was faced with a decision about medical care near the end of life. What was positive about that experience? What do you wish would have been done differently?

Here and now...

Do you have any significant health problems now? What kinds of things bring you such joy that, should a health problem prevent you from doing them any more, life would have little meaning? What short or long-term goals do you have? How might medical treatment help you or hinder you in accomplishing those goals?

What about tomorrow?

What significant health problems do you fear may affect you in the future? How do you feel about the possibility of having to go to a nursing home? How would decisions be made if you could not make them?

Who should make decisions?

An important part of planning is to consider if you could appoint someone to make your healthcare decisions if you could not make them yourself. Many people select a close family member, but you are free to pick anyone you think could best represent you. Whoever you appoint, should have **all** of the following qualifications:

- Can be trusted.
- Is willing to accept this responsibility.
- Is willing to follow the values and instructions you have discussed.
- Is able to make complex, difficult decisions.

It is helpful—but not required—to appoint one or more alternate persons in case your first choice becomes unable or unwilling to represent you. It is best if only one person has authority at a time, but you can instruct your representatives to discuss decisions together if time permits.

What future decisions need to be considered?

Providing instructions for future healthcare decisions may seem like an impossible task. How can anyone plan for all the possibilities? You cannot...but you do not have to.

You need to plan for situations where you:

1. Become unexpectedly incapable of making your own decisions, and
2. It is clear you will have little or no recovery, and
3. The injury or loss of function is significant.

Such a situation might arise because of an injury to the brain from an accident, a stroke, or a slowly progressive disease like Alzheimer's.

To plan for this type of situation, many people state: "If I'm going to be a vegetable, let me go." or "No heroics." or "Don't keep me alive on machines." While these remarks are a beginning, they simply are too vague to guide decision making.

You need to completely describe under what circumstances your goals for medical care should be changed from attempting to prolong life to being allowed to die. In some situations certain treatments may not make sense because they will not help, but other treatments will be of important benefit. Consider these three questions.

1. When would it make sense to continue certain treatments in an effort to prolong life and seek recovery?
2. When would it make sense to stop or withhold certain treatments and accept death when it comes?
3. Under any circumstance, what kind of comfort care would you want, including medication, spiritual, and environmental options?

Making these choices requires understanding the information, weighing the benefits and burdens from your perspective and then discussing your choices with those closest to you.

Share your views...

*with the person or people who would make
your decisions if you could not make them.*

What's next?

How do you make sure that your choices are respected? First talk about them with your family, friends, clergy and physician, then put your choices in writing. Information about putting your plans in writing—in an advance directive—is available from your healthcare organization or attorney.

Do you have any significant health problems?
What health problems do you fear in the future?

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Consider what
frightens you most
about medical
treatment.

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What role does religion,
faith, or spirituality play in
how you live your life?

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How does cost influence
your decisions about
medical care?

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Ask yourself... what
will most help me
live well at this point
in my life?

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In terms of future medical care, under what circumstances would you want the goals of medical treatment to switch from attempting to prolong life, to focusing on comfort? Describe these circumstances in as much detail as possible.

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What is your idea of comfort care?

Describe how you would want medications to be used to provide comfort. What type of spiritual care would you want?

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These are the things I need to tell my loved ones:

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I need to learn more about:

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I need to ask my health care provider:

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