



March 2025

# ELDER CARE

## A Resource for Interprofessional Providers

### Understanding Advance Directives

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#### Introduction

Advance directives are essential tools that empower individuals to make decisions about their healthcare preferences before they are unable to communicate. These legal documents provide clarity and guidance to families, designated decision-makers, and clinicians, ensuring that patient autonomy is respected and upheld. Understanding and implementing advance directives is a cornerstone of palliative care and an essential part of delivering high-quality, patient-centered care.

#### Who Needs Advance Directives?

Advance directives are recommended for **all adults** because anyone could unexpectedly face a situation where they cannot make medical decisions. Advance directives are particularly important for:

- Individuals with chronic illnesses, terminal conditions, or progressive cognitive decline.
- Adults undergoing high-risk surgeries or treatments.
- People with complex family dynamics or limited support systems.
- Anyone wanting to ensure their healthcare aligns with personal, cultural, or religious values.

#### What Are Advance Directives?

Advance directives are legal documents that encompass:

1. **Medical Power of Attorney (Healthcare Proxy):** Appoints a trusted individual to make medical decisions on the patient's behalf if they cannot.
2. **Living Will:** Documents specific medical treatments the patient wishes to accept or decline, such as resuscitation, intubation, or feeding tubes, in specific clinical scenarios.
3. **POLST (Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment):** Medical orders that detail treatment preferences, often used by patients nearing the end of life. POLST forms are actionable by emergency

medical services and are designed for immediate clinical use.

#### 4. Additional Preferences:

- Organ and tissue donation preferences.
- Post-death instructions, including funeral or burial wishes.

#### What Happens Without Advance Directives?

Without advance directives, patients risk the following:

1. **Uncertainty and Family Conflict:** Decisions fall to state-designated surrogates, which may not align with the patient's preferences or chosen individuals. This can lead to disputes among family members.
2. **Unwanted Medical Treatments:** In the absence of documented preferences, default medical care may include aggressive interventions, such as life support, that might not align with the patient's values.
3. **Delayed Care Decisions:** Providers may hesitate or seek court intervention when no clear guidance is available.
4. **Potential Emotional Burden:** Families may experience guilt, anxiety, or regret when forced to make life-altering decisions without clear guidance.

#### If You Have Advance Directives, Will Your Wishes Be Followed?

Advance directives provide a strong framework, but their effectiveness depends on several factors:

- **Clarity and Specificity:** Clear, detailed documents minimize ambiguity and ensure healthcare providers can honor the patient's preferences.
- **Communication:** Patients should discuss their wishes with their healthcare proxy, family, and healthcare team to avoid misinterpretations.
- **Legal and Institutional Variations:**
  - ⇒ **State Laws:** Advance directives are generally honored across states, but differences in

#### TIPS

- **Plan Ahead:** Talk about advance directives while you're healthy and decisions are easier.
- **Select Wisely:** Choose a trusted person who can confidently advocate for your wishes.
- **Be Clear:** Specify your preferences to ensure your medical care aligns with your values.
- **Stay Updated:** Review and revise your directives after significant life changes.
- **Share Widely:** Provide copies to your proxy, family, and healthcare team for easy access.

# ELDER CARE

Continued from front page

language, forms, and recognition of surrogates may arise.

⇒ **Healthcare Systems:** Some providers or facilities may hesitate to implement directives that limit treatment due to ethical concerns.

- **Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** If disagreements occur between proxies, families, or clinicians, ethics consultations or legal interventions may be necessary.

## Technological Advances in Advance Directives

1. **Electronic Health Records (EHR):** Advance directives can now be stored and accessed through EHRs, ensuring availability to clinicians across healthcare systems.
2. **Mobile Apps:** There are online tools and apps that can simplify the creation, storage, and sharing of advance directives. Patients can update their preferences in real time.
3. **Wearable Technologies:** Medical alert devices now include QR codes linking to digital copies of advance directives for emergency responders.
4. **AI-Assisted Planning:** AI-driven platforms provide personalized guidance based on medical history, cultural values, and patient preferences, improving the decision-making process.
5. **Telehealth Integration:** Virtual consultations allow patients to discuss advance directives with clinicians from the comfort of their homes.

## Discussing Advance Directives with Patients

- **Start Early:** Begin conversations during routine wellness visits or before hospitalizations.
- **Normalize the Conversation:** Frame the discussion as part of comprehensive care planning, not just for terminal illnesses.
- **Address Cultural Sensitivities:** Be aware of cultural or religious perspectives on autonomy, family involvement, and death.

- **Provide Accessible Resources:** Use simplified language and offer translations or interpreters for patients with limited English proficiency.
- **Encourage Regular Reviews:** Advance directives should be revisited annually or after major life changes (e.g., marriage, divorce, diagnosis, or relocation).

## Debunking Common Misconceptions

- **"It's Only for the Elderly":** Advance directives are for everyone, regardless of age or health.
- **"It Means No Care":** Advance directives clarify preferred treatments, which may include life-sustaining measures.
- **"It's Permanent":** Advance directives can be revised as circumstances or values change.

## Special Considerations

1. **Ethical Conflicts:** When disagreements arise between written directives and surrogate decision-makers, clinicians should prioritize the patient's documented wishes. Ethics or legal consultations may be helpful.
2. **Cultural and Religious Factors:** Some cultures prioritize family or community decision-making over individual autonomy. This can create challenges when directives designate a single healthcare proxy. Providers should honor these values while adhering to legal requirements.
3. **Education and Awareness:** Racial and ethnic disparities exist in advance directive completion due to mistrust or lack of awareness. Tailored education can help bridge this gap.

## Conclusion

Advance directives empower patients to control their care, reduce uncertainty for families, and guide clinicians in delivering patient-centered care. By leveraging technology, engaging in culturally sensitive conversations, and normalizing these discussions, providers can ensure that patients' end-of-life wishes are understood, respected, and honored.

## References and Resources:

National Institute on Aging – Advance Care Planning <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/advance-care-planning/advance-care-planning-advance-directives-health-care>

Aging with Dignity – Five Wishes <https://agingwithdignity.org/programs/five-wishes/>

Arizona State Life Care Planning packet <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcqlclefindmkaj/https://www.azag.gov/sites/default/files/docs/seniors/life-care/2023/LCP-Complete-Packet-fillable.pdf>

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This project has been supported by various grants over the years including: the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration - Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program, and the University of Arizona Center on Aging