

Your Right to Decide

Communicating Your Healthcare Choices

Questions about medical care at the end of life are very important today due to the ability of medical technology to prolong life, as well as people's ideas about good quality of life. You may have seen several highly publicized court cases in the last few years involving comatose or dying patients and their families where their wishes were at odds and state court had to determine the best interests of the patient. The best way to be in control of the medical treatment you receive in such a situation is to record your preferences in advance in a document called an Advance Directive for Health Care "ADHC". The information below provides answers to frequently asked questions about ADHCs. For more information, consult with your doctor or lawyer.

What are ADHCs?

ADHCs are documents written in advance of serious illness that either state your choices about medical treatment options or name someone else to make decisions about medical treatment for you if you become unable to do so. ADHCs allow you to legally make valid decisions about any future medical treatments you may receive, giving you control of your own end-of-life care.

What Does Alabama Law Say about ADHCs?

Generally, a person has the right to refuse any medical or surgical treatments he or she does not wish to receive. Alabama law allows a person to sign an ADHC so that his or her wishes will be followed, even if he or she becomes unable to communicate. An ADHC must be signed in the presence of two witnesses or a notary public in order for it to be legally valid. ABC Hospice can provide examples of Advance Directives upon request.

What is a Living Will?

A Living Will is a legal document in which you can instruct your physician to withhold or withdraw specific life-sustaining procedures if you become terminally ill.

What Is a Healthcare Proxy?

A Healthcare Proxy is a person who serves as your agent to make medical decisions for you as you become unable to do so. You should also nominate a contingent or substitute healthcare proxy in case of death or the disability of your first choice.

Can an Advance Directive Be Changed?

These documents can be changed or revoked at any time. If changes are made to an Advance Directive, the outdated copies should be destroyed, and new copies should be provided to family, physicians and your attorney. If you wish to revoke an Advance Directive during treatment in a hospice program, you need to notify your primary physician or hospice nurse.

Will an Advance Directive be Honored in an Emergency?

Usually, it is impossible to determine the chances of survival in an emergency situation or to determine the outlook for recovery. After the initial emergency has passed, and depending on a patient's condition, his or her Advance Directive may come into play, especially if he or she is unable to express his or her wishes.

Can a Patient or Family Member Request that Treatment Stop Once It Has Started?

Yes, if the patient has an Advance Directive and the instructions are clear. If the patient's condition begins suddenly, it may take days or even weeks before the outlook for recovery is known. During that time, the doctor or medical provider may use any treatment that might be beneficial to the patient's survival. When the outlook for recovery is known, treatment can be stopped if the patient's instructions indicate that he or she would not want to continue treatment under the circumstances.

Is There a Time Limit on Advance Directives?

No, but patients are encouraged to update any Advance Directives periodically, since this indicates that a great deal of thought has been given to the matter.

After an Advance Directive Is Completed, What Does the Patient/Family Do With It?

Copies of an Advance Directive should be given to family members, close friends or minister. If an agent has been appointed to make healthcare decisions for you, a copy of the Advance Directive should be given to him or her. Finally, patients might wish to consider putting a card in his/her wallet stating that an Advance Directive has been signed and where it can be located. In order for ABC Hospice to honor an Advance Directive, a copy of the document must be provided to someone at the hospice program, such as a physician, nurse, social worker or chaplain, so that it can be included in the medical record.

For help or more information:

Alabama Commission on Aging..... 1-800-243-5463

Choice in Dying..... 1-800-989-9455