



Dr. Vanessa Little

Sharing Your Wishes: *Advance Health Care Directives*

By Judy Connor

We recently talked with Dr. Vanessa Little, a medical director for Pathways Home Health & Hospice, about measures you can take now to make sure your health care wishes are followed in the future if you are unable to speak for yourself. Here is what Dr. Little shared with us.

Why not wait to deal with these issues when the time comes?

I tell my patients that life can be unpredictable that anyone could be hit with an incurable cancer or be in a car accident that leaves them lying in an intensive care unit or have a stroke that renders them unable to speak. I don't want them to dwell on these kinds of thoughts but I do want them to spend a little time thinking about questions like: "How would you want to be treated if you are near death? Who would you want with you? Where would you like to be? Are there specific treatments that you would or would not want?"

What has your experience been with patients facing life-threatening situations?

"A runaway train" or "out of control" – that's how some of my patients have described life in

the later stages of chronic illness or when they faced life-limiting disease.

I find people usually have strong feelings about their care at this time – feelings about going to the hospital, being resuscitated or which family member the doctor will listen to if they can't speak for themselves. The thought of not being able to make your own decisions can cause a lot of anxiety.

What can people do to regain control?

Well, one important thing that seems to help restore a sense of control is when patients are able to tell their doctor and family about the kinds of treatments they want for themselves in various situations.

As a physician, I really appreciate having direct guidance from my patients if their health condition becomes life threatening. And letting family members know what you want is like a gift to them. If you're ever unable to speak for yourself, they don't have to speculate about what you might have wanted.

Having this conversation with loved ones may turn out to be less

difficult than you might think. Sometimes it is a relief to them. In the long run, you will have taken a huge burden from their shoulders.

Is it enough to just talk to your doctor and family?

It's a good first step but writing your wishes down helps ensure they will be carried out. You can fill out a simple Advance Health Care Directive to guide family and healthcare professionals. Another thing you can do is sit down with your doctor and together fill out Physician Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment or POLST.

What exactly is an Advance Directive?

An Advance Health Care Directive is a legal document that has two parts. In the first part you name a person (and possibly alternates) that you would like to speak for you if you are unable to direct your own care. This document makes that person your Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care.

In the second part of an Advance Directive, you can say what kinds of treatments you would like or would not like such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), tube feeding or artificial breathing. (This part is sometimes referred to as a Living Will.)

Is an Advance Directive only to say you don't want certain procedures done?