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April 16th is National Health Care Decisions Day

By Trisha W. Hall

Today is National Health Care Decisions Day¹, established to educate and encourage people to make their health care preferences known to family, loved ones, and medical providers. The most effective way for you to do this is through the creation of an advance directive for health care. Also known as a living will, this document states your preferences in writing and also may name a person of your choosing to act as your surrogate decision-maker if you are unable to make or communicate health care decisions on your own.

Coinciding with National Health Care Decisions Day is a study published by the New England Journal of Medicine² and reported on by the New York Times³ that suggests a strong correlation between an elderly patient's having an advance directive and health care surrogate and having their preferences respected. The study concluded that the use of advance directives has increased significantly in the last fifteen years because of greater awareness and increased comfort levels. It also found that advance directives or surrogate decision making is often needed at the end of a person's life. Moreover, it found that advance directives are likely to be followed when needed. In fact, 97% of patients studied who requested that end-of-life care be limited to treatments to keep them comfortable (as opposed to wanting treatments to prolong their lives) received care consistent with their directives. In addition to the respect given to advance directives, it appears that people who name surrogate decision makers are more likely to receive the care they would choose if able. For example, patients who named surrogates were less likely to die in a hospital and received care more responsive to unforeseen circumstances.

If you do not have an advance directive for health care, consider getting one. If you are aware that someone you love does not have an advance directive, consider finding a way to encourage them to get one. Evidence shows that they work. You may even find it helpful, although difficult, to discuss with a loved one your preferences for end-of-life care. A conversation, in addition to a written directive, may put you and your loved one more at peace with the prospect of relying on the advance directive and result in better outcomes overall.

¹ www.nationalhealthcaredecisionday.org

² Silveira, M.D., M.P.H., Maria J., Scott, Y.H. Kim, M.D., Ph.D., and Kenneth M. Lango, M.D., Ph.D. "Advance Directives and Outcomes of Surrogate Decision Making before Death." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 362:13 (April 1, 2010.)

³ Chen, M.D., Pauline W. "Making Your Wishes Known at the End Of Life." *New York Times*. April 15, 2010, <http://www.ny-times.com/2010/04/16/health/15chen.html?scp=2&sq=advance%20directive&st=cse>



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