



REGIONAL GERIATRIC PROGRAMS OF ONTARIO

Advance Directives – Your Questions Answered.

Autonomy and participation in decision-making are important to seniors and their families. The RGP's of Ontario recommends early, open and ongoing communication about a person's treatment preferences so that his/her values about end of life care are well known and understood by family members and healthcare professionals.

Advance directives are valuable when used as a communication tool for family, physicians and other healthcare providers to have a common understanding of what the person receiving care would like to happen at the end of his/her life.

What is an Advance Directive?

An Advance Directive, sometimes called a "Living Will" is a document containing your wishes about your future health care if you become incapacitated by illness, injury, or old age. It is part of a process, usually referred to as 'Advance Care Planning', intended to prepare patients and families for common scenarios at the end of life. Completion of an advance directive form is only one part of the advance care planning process; current research indicates that ongoing discussion about health care wishes and goals among patients, families and health care providers is an equally essential component of advance care planning. While it is impossible to cover all potential situations in a written document, clear discussion with family about values and beliefs related to end of life will help reach a common understanding of what to do when the situation arises.

Why should I prepare an Advance Directive?

People complete Advance Directives both to maintain control over their health care, and to relieve their family members of the need to make difficult decisions of their behalf. Benefits to preparing directives include maintenance of personal autonomy, comfort for family members when making difficult decisions on behalf of their loved ones and avoiding court involvement in decision making. Prior discussion is essential for clarification of intentions, wishes and values and may reduce guilt and stress of substitute decision makers when the time comes. Documentation of discussions and patient preferences may help to minimize misunderstandings and increase the stability of the decision during subsequent admissions to hospital.

When should this be prepared?

An Advance Directive should be prepared when you are able to understand treatment choices and appreciate their consequences. It only takes effect when or if you are no longer capable of expressing these wishes for yourself.

How should it be used?

Since an Advance Directive speaks for you when you are not able to speak for yourself, other people should know that it exists. Give copies of the document to your family members and health care provider. Review your values and wishes with these people so that they be more likely to understand and follow your wishes. You can change your mind about the decisions you have outlined in your Advance Directive at any time when you are capable. For this reason, it is recommended that patients review their document with family and physicians every year or two years.

Who should be involved?

All patients must be included in the end of life decision-making and should be offered the opportunity to state their end of life wishes where possible. Advance directives have a great deal of potential as a tool for facilitating communication among patients, families and physicians. All parties have an important role to play in the advance care planning process. For example, your health care provider can provide you with important information about treatment options to support your decision-making.

Can you suggest an Advance Directive form/tool for me to use?

The most predominant Advance Directives forms in Ontario are Dr. Molloy's "Let Me Decide", the University of Toronto's Joint Centre for Bioethics Living Will, developed by Peter A Singer, and the government of Ontario's recently developed "Guide to Advance Care Planning". In addition, some Ontario hospitals and LTC facilities have policies regarding the use of Advance Directives; some have developed their own advance directive forms.