

# DECISIONS

## Tools of Communication

*I heard something today at the office. You know, it made me think. Maybe we should discuss it. Is this a good time?*

*Of course. What is it?*

*Well, Sally says her uncle isn't responding well in the ICU. And her family just doesn't know what to do.*

*You mean there wasn't an advance directive in his file?*

*She didn't say. Uh, honey?*

*Yes?*

*What's an advance directive?*

**T**he previous *Decisions* bulletins discussed medical progress, quality of life, making end-of-life decisions and communicating your preferences to a trusted spokesperson. Now we'll look at advance directives—legal communication tools designed to make your feelings known.

### Using Advance Directives

If you're ever in a position where you cannot make medical treatment decisions for yourself, your doctor will most likely ask your closest available relative or friend to help decide what's best for you. For many people that works fine. But sometimes not everyone agrees about what to do.

How can you help prevent this dilemma? Discussing your values about end-of-life care with your family and physician is the first and most important step. Completing an advance directive document can also be helpful by describing in writing what is important to you. In the future, if you cannot speak for yourself, this tool can affirm the conversations already held with loved ones and your doctor.

### The Fourth in a Series of Six Bulletins

*Feel free to share this and the other Decisions bulletins with your loved ones and doctors.*

1. **The changing role of medicine and our changing view of death**
2. **Quality of life**
3. **How to communicate your decision with loved ones**
4. **Tools of communication**
5. **Building a partnership with your doctor**
6. **Living and dying in a caring community**

## Understanding Advance Directives

Advance directives can help communicate your wishes when you no longer can. They can help your loved ones by reducing confusion and disagreement over your choices. Any adult who is able to make decisions can establish an advance directive. Generally speaking, there are two types of advance directives:

### Medical Power of Attorney

A Medical Power of Attorney *lets you name someone to make your health care decisions when you can't*. This type of advance directive may also be called a "health care proxy" or "appointment of a health care agent." The person you appoint may be called your health care agent, surrogate, attorney-in-fact or proxy. Most states allow this person to speak for you in any health care decision, not just those at the end of life.

### Living Will

Living wills are written instructions that explain your wishes about medical treatment should you suffer from a terminal illness. They're called "living" wills because they take effect while you are still alive but unable to speak for yourself.

Signing a living will tells your doctors you don't want treatment that prolongs your dying. It calls for stopping life-sustaining treatment if you have a terminal condition. You can still receive treatment to keep you comfortable. Some states define when the living will goes into effect, and limit the treatment to which it applies.

---

**The most wonderful gift you can give yourself and your loved ones is peace of mind. Make your wishes known now.**

---

Advance directive forms are often available in hospitals and nursing homes. For more information about advance

directives and copies of forms for different states, contact:

Choice in Dying  
200 Varick Street, 10th Floor  
New York, NY 10014-4810  
1-800-989-9455  
Internet: [www.choices.org](http://www.choices.org)

Keep the original advance directive document and give copies to those who need it, such as your doctor, family members, and/or a close friend. You can change or cancel the form at any time. Keep the document close at hand (not in a safe deposit box.) If you are admitted to the hospital, bring a copy of your advance directive.

## Part of the Communication Process

Communicating your wishes to your loved ones and doctor is essential. Completing the advance directive may bring you an added sense of security. By communicating your desires, you take responsibility for decisions about your life and death and help your family and friends move on with peace of mind.

## Next Bulletin: Building a partnership with your doctor

Discussing end-of-life issues with your physician.

*Written by a diverse group of healthcare professionals and clergy dedicated to informing the public about end-of-life decisions.*