

# DECISIONS

## Building a Partnership with Your Doctor

*Doctor, I brought you something today.*

*Well, thank you. What is it?*

*An advance directive. I've been meaning to talk to you about my end-of-life choices for some time now. And I decided there's no better time than during my check-up.*

*That's great, Mrs. Andrews. It's a smart thing to do when you're healthy. I wish all my patients made their health care decisions known. It sure would make it easier on me—and on their families.*

**I**n the previous *Decisions* bulletins, we reviewed medical progress, quality of life, communicating end-of-life decisions and completing advance directives. Now we'll look at discussing these issues with your physician.

### **A Healthy Doctor-Patient Relationship**

There is never a more important time to have a good talk with your physician than when reviewing decisions about the end of your life. For patients, families and physicians alike, this subject is probably one of the most difficult to tackle. It's only natural to put off talking about death—especially when we're feeling healthy.

When it comes to your values, health care choices and end-of-life decisions, you're the expert. And when it comes to your medical condition, your doctor is the authority. It's easy to see then why building a partnership between patient and physician is vital—even if you don't have a personal physician and are being treated by the doctor for the first time.

So what's the key to developing a strong relationship with your doctor. Good communication, pure and simple.

### **The Fifth 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**

## When You're Healthy

One of the most important times to discuss your feelings with your physician is when you're healthy and have given some thought to your beliefs and values.

Doctors want to know your attitudes toward aggressive treatments that may be used should you become very ill. These treatments include ventilators that help you breathe, shocking the heart, CPR and other potentially life-prolonging treatments.

For some people, the possible benefit to receiving aggressive care near the end of life may not be worth the prospect of spending their last days in a high-tech environment. Physicians who understand their patients' views, values and priorities are best able to assist patients and families at the time when treatment decisions must be made.

## If You're Not Healthy

Physicians should always speak with their patients about their wishes before asking anyone else—unless the patient is too ill to speak. Keep in mind that you may not feel the same about treatment when you're ill as when you're healthy.

Remember, no decision you made before is written in stone—even documents like the Medical Power of Attorney and the Living Will. If you do change your mind, be sure to inform your doctor.

## The Gray Area

Your doctor—or team of doctors as is usually the case—should fully explain your condition, expected outcome and the benefits and burdens of available treatment options. But sometimes that's easier said than done. Fact is, each patient responds to treatment differently. So there are many gray areas about what is occurring medically and what might happen in the future.

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Ask your physicians just how certain they are about your situation and make decisions accordingly.

## Clarifying Your Wishes

Patients often say they want their doctor to “do everything” or they “don't want to be a vegetable.” But these vague and subjective statements do little to help the physician. A better solution is to state your goals.

“I really want to travel to my grandchild's wedding.” “Talking with my family is what's important to me.” These are two examples of what you could say to help your doctor determine how likely you are to achieve your goals.

## Making a Difficult Choice Easier

One subject that may arise is when to withdraw medical support if there seems to be little chance of reversing the disease or injury. This is a gut-wrenching time for everyone—including doctors.

Here again, by making your family and doctor aware of your goals, values and beliefs, you can help ease their distress if they need to decide whether to allow the natural process of death to take place.

A partnership between you and your doctor—together with good communication about your medical condition, personal values and goals—can make your final days easier on you and your loved ones.

## Next Bulletin: **6** *Living and dying in a caring community*

Receiving care and comfort at the end of life.

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