

Advanced Directives, POLST and End of Life Plans

If you are ever unable to communicate your wishes to medical personnel, who will speak for you? Have you discussed your values regarding quality of life and life sustaining treatments with your healthcare provider and your family? Have you completed an Advance Directive or a POLST (Provider Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment)?

An Advance Directive is a document or set of documents that outlines who will speak for you and what medical care you want to receive in the event that you are seriously ill and unable to communicate your wishes to medical personnel. Typically, these documents are a Living Will and a Durable Powers of Attorney for Healthcare. Sample forms are available on the internet and vary from free legal boilerplate to outlines that help you express your five final wishes. These documents are only used if you are unable to give informed consent or refusal of medical treatment due to incapacity. A copy of the documents should be given to your healthcare provider and your family.

Although the templates for Advance Directives are easily obtained and completed, you might want to invest some time, thought and research on their content and your decisions. For example, when creating the Durable Powers of Attorney for Healthcare, keep in mind the gravity of both sides of the agreement, selecting a person to speak for your wishes and accepting the responsibility to make decisions in a medical emergency. Clearly, you want to select someone, probably a close relative or friend, who you can trust to make decisions that reflect your values. However, your designator must also be willing to make potentially life or death decisions in a healthcare crisis situation. The person with the best understanding of your values may not be comfortable with the responsibility of making critical medical decisions on your behalf.

The POLST is a simple form designed for emergency personnel to quickly communicate to them your basic medical decisions. It designates what life sustaining treatments can be administered. (Life sustaining treatments are defined as “any medical procedure or intervention that, when administered to a qualified patient, will serve only to prolong the dying process.”) POLST forms can be obtained from your healthcare provider or on-line at <http://polst.mt.gov>. To be valid, the POLST must be signed by you and your healthcare provider. The POLST is a medical order that will be honored by emergency personnel. In addition to providing your healthcare provider with your POLST form, a copy should be kept on the front

of your refrigerator or in your medicine cabinet. (The EMTs will check both locations.) The POLST will be transferred with you to any healthcare facility.

All Advance Directives can be stored for free at <https://app.mt.gov/registry/> for access by healthcare providers.

The importance of these documents to the terminally ill is easily apparent. In recent years, many healthy adults have completed Advance Directives to ensure compliance with their end-of-life wishes. Designating who will help carry the burden of your decisions about whether to be kept alive artificially, levels of disability and medical intervention when there is no hope for recovery should be done well before a healthcare crisis. A discussion about your decisions will make their implementation easier to bear.

Discussions about end-of-life medical treatments can be very sensitive and uncomfortable, particularly with family members. Even so, these discussions can help avoid conflicts among family members at a time when they could be supporting one another. A discussion with your healthcare provider might be a good practice run. Not only will you have an opportunity to give voice to your thoughts about end-of-life decisions, you will also be able to consider additional questions and obtain information from an objective professional.

The Ruby Valley Hospital and Clinics are available to assist you with any end-of-life plans you may wish to make.

References:

<http://POLST.mt.gov>

<http://www.nwhc.org/data/content/POLSI%20FORM.pdf>

<http://msuextension.org/publications/FamilyFinancialManagement/MT201112HR.pdf>

<http://msuextension.org/publications/FamilyFinancialManagement/MT200602HR.pdf>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advance_health_care_directive

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Wishes

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