Advance Directives
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Abstract

Appropriate care for patients at the end of life has long been a struggle for healthcare providers. Vital to providing quality care is understanding and respecting patients’ wishes. Identifying these wishes can be simple if the patient has completed advance directives when s/he is competent.

Multiple studies show that the majority of Americans prefer to die at home, as opposed to dying in a hospital or other healthcare setting. However, 75-80% of Americans die at a healthcare facility, while only 20% die at home. Advance directives are a health policy issue in that they improve quality of healthcare and decrease costs. Unfortunately, more people than not fail to complete an advance directive. When advance directive forms are filled out, they frequently are not followed. Patients rarely make directives a part of their medical record. Often, living wills are vague and difficult to implement. Also, physicians and other healthcare providers ignore the directives.

Patients should be required to fill out an advance directive form prior to admission to any hospital, nursing home, or other health care facility. Physicians and other health care providers need to be strongly encouraged to follow these directives, with appropriate safeguards put in place to protect physicians from litigation when they respect a patient’s wishes. If the directives are ignored, legal action should continue to be an option.