



TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Village Out-Patient Clinic • 100 Old Billerica Rd., Bedford, MA 01730



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THE MOST IMPORTANT CONVERSATION:

What Are Your Wishes?

by

Hospice of the North Shore and Greater Boston

What would be your wishes for health care if you were no longer able to speak for yourself? Few people want to talk about it. And most people avoid the subject as long as they can. But health care workers have seen the stress families experience when they haven't talked about it in advance. A crisis hits, and no one is sure what to do. The uncertainty only aggravates everyone's anxiety.

The solution: advance directives. These simple, easy to enact documents ensure that your wishes are known and followed. Advance directives cross all aspects of health care. Whenever people can't speak for themselves, the advance directives help health care providers and loved ones know and follow their wishes. It's important to note that advance directives are only for those situations where someone can't speak for him or herself. For example, if you were unconscious, the advance directive would be consulted. But once you're conscious again, then you would speak for yourself.

What is an Advance Directive?

An advance directive is a document that states either your wishes for care if you are terminally ill (a living will) or appoints someone you know to speak on your behalf and make decisions about your care (a health care proxy). Each state has its own version of the legally accepted advance directive.

In Massachusetts, the recognized advance directive is the health care proxy, a simple legal form that doesn't require a lawyer or any legal representation. In fact, all you need to make it binding is two adults to witness your signature.

Be in Control of Your Future

While there is no requirement that you must have one, a health care proxy gives you a better chance of having your wishes followed. Often when the

topic is brought up, many people breathe a sigh of relief. They're glad for the opportunity to get the discussion out in the open. Having a health care proxy is a point of comfort and communication. You may think you know someone's wishes, but do you really?

Research shows that people have strong feelings about how they'd like to be cared for at end-of-life. Yet many people never have these conversations with their loved ones. More importantly, a health care proxy isn't limited to terminal illness – it is for any situation where you can't speak for yourself, from an allergic reaction to a car accident.

While many people assume that their spouse or children would be the natural decision-makers for them should they be unable to speak for themselves, the reality doesn't always work that way. When you can't speak for yourself, the right to make decisions about your care is open to conflict. One or more family members may disagree. The conflict regarding your wishes and who has the right to speak for you increases the stress surrounding the crisis, and may actually overshadow or delay your treatment while everyone involved tries to sort out who has the right to direct your care.

How the Proxy Works

Unlike a living will where people specifically spell out their wishes, you use a health care proxy to assign someone to direct your care. The benefit of a health care proxy over a living will is two-fold: First, there is no way that one document could foresee all the potential situations that arise. By designating someone to be your proxy, you're able to share your values and general ideas about how you want to be cared for. Your proxy (or agent as they are called) can then apply your wishes to whatever situations arise. In some cases that may involve engaging extraordinary means and in other cases, it might involve declining treatment. Second, the health care proxy can be easily adapted





as your wishes evolve over time. You can simply tell whomever you've assigned as your proxy about the changes in your wishes.

Your proxy has full authority to act on your behalf, making decisions for your physical and mental health care. However, your proxy is not financially responsible for your care or your wishes. For your proxy, you can select someone with whom you feel comfortable having conversations about your personal choices including such tough topics as a terminal illness or nursing home care. Your proxy can be your spouse, child, friend or someone else you trust. The best choice is someone who knows you well, understands your values and beliefs, and can advocate for your wishes.

Broaching the subject

It is suggested that broaching the topic can be as simple as mentioning this article: "Did you see that article in the newsletter? What did you think?" You can also use a recent news story or television program as the impetus for discussion. And many people tackle this subject after a friend or acquaintance has encountered a health care crisis. A great time to discuss it with your family as well as your physician is at your annual physical.

Having that all-important conversation

By assigning someone to be your proxy, it leads naturally to a discussion about your wishes. Consider different scenarios that may occur. Use "what if" questions. Think about situations that friends and others have faced recently. What would you want in those circumstances? How would you want your care to progress in those situations?

In the June 15th Health Education Lecture, the staff from Hospice of the North Shore and Greater Boston will explore how to begin meaningful conversations about your wishes for end-of-life care and what options are available through hospice.

Beginning Conversations about End-of-Life

By Marcia Feldman,
Palliative Care Coordinator

How much do your loved ones know about your wishes for treatment at the end of your life? Have you had these conversations and/or written down your wishes? If so, does your family know where to find these documents? Or do you avoid this topic and assume that they will handle the situation as best they can when the time comes?

Family members who are faced with making decisions for their loved one's health care can find great solace in knowing that they are carrying out the person's wishes during a difficult time. Chances are that the clearer you communicate your wishes to your loved ones ahead of time, the more likely they will be empowered to advocate on your behalf when the time comes.

There are many tools available to help us begin these conversations. One easy to use example is "The Five Wishes" which is available in the Clinic. It lets you specify your desires for medical or life-sustaining treatments, and spiritual or emotional treatment if you become seriously ill. Being clear about your wishes ahead of time is a gift you can give your loved ones.



Another wonderful resource called the "Personal Data Book" was compiled by Carleton-Willard Resident, Jim Stockwell and members of the Resident Council. In addition to including The Five Wishes, it also serves as one central place where you can designate other useful and key information that your loved ones would need. For example, you can gather your Advance Directives, key family and friends' contact information, funeral/burial wishes, obituary information, financial details and personal papers. If you are interested in receiving a copy of the Personal Data Book, please contact Marcia Feldman in the Clinic.

In the next **Health Education Lecture on June 15th at 10:30am - Auditorium**, we will hear about **"Caring Conversations/ Hospice Care: What is it?"** with Mary Crowe, LICSW from Hospice of the North Shore and Greater Boston.

On **June 22nd, Allison Diamond, NP (MGH)** will give a health education talk, **"Everything You Wanted to Know about Urinary Incontinence but were Afraid to Ask,"** at 10:30 a.m. in Auditorium Center.