

## ADVANCE CARE PLANNING

Advance care planning is not just about old age. At any age, a medical crisis could leave someone too ill to make his or her own healthcare decision. Even if you are not sick now, making healthcare plans for the future is an important step toward making sure you get the medical care you would want, even when doctors and family members are making the decisions for you.

Advance care planning involves learning about the types of decisions that might need to be made, considering those decisions ahead of time, and then letting others know about your preferences, often by putting them into an *advance directive*. An advance directive is a legal document that goes into effect only if you are incapacitated and unable to speak for yourself. This could be the result of disease or severe injury – no matter how old you are. It helps your family know what type of medical care you want. It also allows you to express your values and desires related to end-of-life care. You might think of an advance directive as a living document – one that you can adjust as your situation changes because of new information or a change in your health.

Medical research plays an important role in the health of Americans of all ages. Because of advances in medicine and in public health, Americans are living longer and staying healthier as they grow older. The National Institute on Aging (NIA) supports much of the research around the country that looks at how people age and how to improve their health in their later years. Some NIA supported research focuses on advance care planning. In one study for example, scientists funded by NIA found that advance directives can make a difference and that people who document their preferences in this way are more likely to get the care they prefer at the end of life than people who do not.

With all the medical interventions available to a person who is hospitalized, depending on the disease or medical crisis, these interventions may cause suffering especially if the outcome is grim. There are many decisions that could come up near death; CPR, ventilator use, artificial nutrition or artificial hydration, comfort care. What do all these interventions mean and how will they affect medical outcomes. Your decisions about how to handle any of these situations could be different at age 40 than at age 85. Or they could be different if you have an incurable condition as opposed to being generally healthy. What makes life meaningful to you? What does quality of life look like for you? An advance directive allows you to provide instruction for these types of situations.

I have seen many instances in the hospital where there is a critical change in health or a life changing event such as a stroke or heart attack and the family is left to make critical decisions. This can be a burden to your loved ones if there was never a conversation around these issues or a document put into place.

**Advance Care Planning** can help you do the much harder job of discovering, clarifying and communicating what is important to you in the face of serious illness.

If you have questions about advance care planning, would like help in starting a conversation with your family or you would like to have someone help you in this process, please call