

Plan for Life's Unexpected Twists

By Deborah Rogers, RN, BS, Care Management Manager at Morton Hospital

Your health and wellness can change quickly. One serious accident or unexpected illness can turn your world upside down - that's why planning for your advanced care and having an Advance Directive is critical when health care decisions need to be made and you are unable to make them.

An example of an Advance Directive is the Health Care Proxy. A Health Care Proxy is a legal form that identifies a spokesperson (or Agent) who will make decisions on your behalf if you are unable to.

There are a few common misconceptions:

Misconception 1: My spouse or next of kin can make health care decisions when I am unable to.

Fact: Not all decisions can be made by the spouse or next of kin.

Misconception 2: I can "name" someone as my spokesperson or Agent, without completing the form.

Fact: An Agent can only speak for an individual when he or she is named on the official Health Care Proxy form, and the forms are properly completed.

Misconception 3: The Health Care Agent will be allowed to make decisions as soon as the Health Care Proxy form is completed.

Fact: The Agent can only make decisions once a physician caring for the form's owner activates the Proxy due to the owner being incapacitated or incompetent.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health also recently approved the use of MOLST (Medical Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment). This form is completed by you and your physician, and lists specific treatments which you may choose to accept or not accept when needed (such as CPR or dialysis). The MOLST form is considered a "physician's order" and is recognized by all health care providers through all settings: home, nursing home, hospital and ambulance transport.

Here is a summary of the steps you should follow in Advance Care Planning:

1. Consider the types of health care you want under specific circumstances. Do you want life-prolonging treatment only if there is a good chance of complete recovery? Under what circumstances would you accept or not accept treatments?
2. Discuss your wishes with the person you plan to name as your Agent, as well as family and close friends. This is important because you cannot anticipate every possibility in your Proxy or MOLST forms, so some decisions may have to be made based on your spoken words.
3. Complete the forms. The Health Care Proxy form requires you to sign and date in front of two witnesses (not family members). The Agent is not required to be present but does need to be notified in advance of the form's completion. The MOLST must be completed by the owner or the Agent/Guardian for the owner, as well as the owner's physician.
4. Keep original copies of your forms in an accessible place at home. Also give a copy to your Health Care Agent, family members and your physician. Bring copies to the hospital if you are admitted.
5. Review your forms annually, or whenever your health situation or philosophical outlook changes. The Health Care Proxy and MOLST forms can be changed at any time.

Although talking to your loved ones about end-of-life care is not easy, planning ahead for life's unexpected twists can help make an emotional time a little less stressful. In the end, Advance Care Planning can provide everyone peace of mind.

To obtain a copy of the Healthy Care Proxy form, call Morton Hospital at 508-828-7370, or visit www.mass.gov and search for "Health Care Proxy Form."

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