





his assumptions about his father's wishes were almost totally wrong and drove home an important point. There is no way that we can honor a patient's wishes if we have not asked them what they are. Therein lies the essence of advance care planning.

Perhaps the best way to frame this discussion is to say that there is no "one size fits all." You are unique, as are your circumstances, relationships, beliefs, values and wishes. But, what is common to all are a few basic tenets. First, you need to understand your health and the diseases which affect it. You are not a statistic, but knowing what to expect with your health concerns may guide your thinking. Second, ask yourself what your expectations are about your health, what you will or will not be able to do, and how your health conditions will affect your quality of life. Third, understand that this is a dynamic process. As our circumstances change, so will our goals and wishes. Perhaps one of the most important tenets of advance care planning is to reassess plans after a major health event and make appropriate changes. Fourth, this is an activity that requires a team approach, to include yourself, your family, your caregivers, and for many, their clergy or other religious/spiritual leader. Finally, there are no right or wrong answers. Advance care planning is simply your opportunity to express your wishes in case that "what if" happens.

One of the most common causes of confusion or delay in delivering health care is deciding who is the decision-maker. Many times it is obvious, such as the parent of a minor. What about a widow with several children who are unable to agree on what to do? The way that I like to present this to my patients is to ask, "If you were in a bad car accident and were brought to the hospital unconscious, whom would you choose to speak for you and make your medical decisions?" This approach conveys the need to have a decision-maker,

also known as a health care proxy, in an emergency when patients cannot speak for themselves. The first and perhaps most important step in advance care planning is assigning a health care proxy and having it documented. This can be as simple as listing that person as an "emergency contact" at your dialysis facility. However, in order to ensure that the person has authority to act on your behalf, it is best to obtain a Power of Attorney for Health Care. Your social worker can provide information to you on how to do this.

The other aspects of Advance Care Planning essentially address your wishes regarding your health care. What interventions or procedures would you want or not want to have? How would you like to address potential comfort issues? What would you like to ensure regarding your treatment? What information do you wish to have communicated to others, especially family? There are several excellent publications addressing the process of advance care planning. Your social worker can help you learn more about them.

I ask your indulgence in looking at this issue from a doctor's point of view. No physician wants to say the following:

1. I have no idea what he would want me to do. I never asked.
2. I should have asked him about his wishes after he had the heart attack, before the stroke, when he could still speak.
3. I would never have done that to him, had I known he never wanted it.
4. You know, we talked about it but never put it on paper.
5. Huge family, really torn, can't agree about what to do. I should have asked him who would make decisions for him "just in case."

In summary, Advance Care Planning is nothing more than planning ahead. If I were to give it a slogan, it would be, "My life, my decisions." It is an opportunity to express your wishes in a formal manner. Help your care team to know your wishes. We can't honor them if we never asked. ■

*Dr. Mahoney is the Chief Medical Officer for Lifeline Vascular Care and has recently joined the DPC Advisory Board. He has been a practicing nephrologist for 25 years.*