

## **End-of- Life Palliative Care Issues: Planning for Advanced Care**

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*Editor 's note: This is one in a series of articles that will explain the Church 's teachings on end-of-life and palliative care issues, and also explore potential practical applications of these teachings.*

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The previous article explained that the Sacrament of the Sick continues the healing ministry that Jesus entrusted to the Apostles. The Sacrament has developed significantly over the centuries. Most recently, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) restored the original intent of the rite as Anointing of the Sick as a reaffirming of the healing nature of the sick and significantly expanded the number of individuals who may receive the Sacrament.

This article illustrates the ways that Catholics use medical forms to communicate their preferences for advanced medical care should they become unable to make these decisions for themselves.

### **Health Care Proxy**

Since there are times when individuals are not able to make medical decisions on their own behalf, the law permits us to empower a trusted individual to make these health care decisions for them. In New York State and some other states this designate is called a Health Care Proxy. In other states it is called a Power of Attorney for Health Care.

Naming a health care proxy is important because no one is able to anticipate one's ability to make end-of-life decisions for themselves in the future. When a patient is incapacitated, a health care proxy makes decisions for the patient by applying Catholic moral principles to his or her specific medical circumstance. A health care proxy applies our moral teaching on the patient's behalf when making difficult medical decisions. The health care proxy is the preferred means for Catholics to communicate end-of-life moral instructions. Since a person can become incapacitated at any age, it is important that everyone designate a health care proxy.

When selecting a person to serve as your health care proxy, it is important that the person has good moral character, knows you well, is familiar with your Catholic beliefs and values, and operates well under stress.

Before one can appoint someone as a health care proxy, a discussion with that person is needed to ensure that he or she is willing to act in this capacity.

It is not necessary to enlist the assistance of an attorney to complete a Health Care Proxy Form.

### **Helping your health care proxy understand your end-of-life wishes**

To be able to accurately act on your behalf, it is essential that you communicate your end-of-life preferences to your health care proxy. For some, this may be a difficult conversation. The website [theconversationproject.org](http://theconversationproject.org) provides a variety of resources to assist individuals in guiding end-of-life discussions with their health care proxy and family.

In addition to discussing medical treatment(s) with your health care proxy, it is advisable that you prepare a written advanced care directive. There

are a number of names for this type of document, but they all serve the same function: to provide your health care proxy with more specific information about how you would like to guide your health care proxy's actions when making medical decisions on your behalf. The advanced care directive should indicate that you are Catholic and wish to be treated according to the tenants of your faith. Decisions by the proxy should be guided by *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Health Care in the United States* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

### **Exceptional Resources**

The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) has developed *A Catholic Guide to End-of Life Decisions* which is a succinct summary of Catholic end-of-life moral teaching. It also explains Church teaching on advanced directives, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. This guide includes a sample health care proxy and advanced care directive. It is available for download from [www.ncbcenter.org/store/catholic-guide-to-end-of-life-decisions-english-pdf-download](http://www.ncbcenter.org/store/catholic-guide-to-end-of-life-decisions-english-pdf-download). The cost to download is less than three dollars. It is advisable to

share this guide with your health care proxy, and to attach the guide to your Health Care Proxy form and advanced care directive.

### **Ethicist-on-Call 24/7**

In emergent situations, we may need a Catholic moral opinion unexpectedly. To meet this need, the *National Catholic Bioethics Center* offers an ethicist-on-call service that is available 24 hours/day and 7 days per week. To access this service, dial (215) 877-2660 and follow the prompts. One of the members of the NCBC team will respond to your call promptly. Since we cannot anticipate when we might need this service, it is advised that this phone number be included among your contacts, and your health care proxy's phone contact list.

### **Summary**

This article illustrated the importance of the Health Care Proxy and Advanced Care Directives, guided by Catholic morals and teachings, play to give instructions for your medical care should you become unable to make those decisions on your own behalf. It also discussed additional resources

made available by the *National Catholic Bioethics Center* (NCBC) for end-of-life

moral decisions.