

## **Patient Rights and Responsibilities: Beyond the Small Print**

Whenever you go to a new physician or enter a health care facility, most likely you are handed a booklet, or worse, told the reverse side of the form you are signing (typically in microscopic print), summarize your patient rights and responsibilities. Unfortunately, at that moment, most people will not take the time to read the document; logically, you will be focused on the incident that has brought you to the doctor's office or hospital. The real time to consider your rights is when you don't need them – when you are not concerned with seeing a doctor or going to the hospital.

What are your rights as a patient and how do we make them count in an age of technological medicine? There are four significant patient rights:

- **Participating in decisions about your care, treatment, and services:** you must receive information in a way that meets your needs. The forms must be in a language you can understand. This can be challenging because modern medicine is complex, with a complicated vocabulary. As health care user, you need to ask for clarification when you don't understand. If English is not the primary language for you or your loved ones, ask for an interpreter. If you feel you need an additional set of "ears", bring a trusted family member or friend to your appointment(s). In addition, if there is more than one treatment option or you are confused about any element of the proposed treatment, it is appropriate and acceptable to seek a

second opinion (some insurance plans require this in the case of a complex diagnosis).

- **Giving or withholding informed consent:** health care providers have an obligation to explain your treatment plan, expected outcomes and anticipated side effects.
- **Knowing the identity of caregivers:** you have the right to know the names and roles of the various health care providers that will take care of you, including the physician, nurses and any other clinicians.
- **Formulating Advance Directives:** the state of Texas has four documents you can use, with the first two being the most important:
  - Medical Power or Attorney (MPOA): designates a decision maker in the event you are unable to consent to treatment options for yourself;
  - Directive to Physician and Family or Surrogates (sometimes called the “Living Will”): identifies treatment choices in the event of a terminal or irreversible condition;
  - Out-of-hospital Do Not Resuscitate Form: avoids emergency response if one is terminally ill; and
  - Declaration for Mental Health Treatment: specifies choices in advance of need.

Execution is relatively simple (the forms are available online, including the HHCI website and at most hospitals) and only requires two witnesses – no notary or lawyer is necessary.

More importantly, once you complete the documents, it is essential to discuss them with

family members and talk about what is important to you when considering prospective treatment choices.

In summary, thinking about your health care treatments is important and formalizing your wishes through Advance Directives is critical to avoid treatments that may not be in line with what is important to us as individuals.