

CHOOSING OPTIONS FOR LIFE-SUSTAINING CARE

Advance planning will ensure your wishes are followed.

Mr. J. had an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) for advanced heart failure. Having survived one episode of cardiac arrest, in which he nearly died, he was at high risk for another episode caused by a rapid, unorganized heart rhythm called ventricular fibrillation. Should this happen, the ICD would shock his heart back into normal rhythm. But at his daughter's wedding, the ICD fired nine times. Each time, it saved his life, but the painful episodes terrified him, and he asked that the ICD be turned off.

Dr. Eva Chittenden, associate director of palliative care at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital, met with Mr. J. to explore his decision further. He stated that he had already been hospitalized five times with 12 months, and he felt this took too much time away from his family.

They discussed his personal values and what action he would want taken if his heart stopped, and the ICD was no longer there to revive him.

After long talks with Dr. Chittenden and his family, Mr. J. chose a "Do Not Attempt Resuscitation/Do Not Intubate (DNAR/DNI)" order. The decision meant he could continue seeing his cardiologist and other doctors, remain on his medications, and return to the hospital for intravenous diuretics. But he would not be revived if his heart stopped.

Doctors wish all their patients would make their preferences known in advance, like Mr. J. did.

"A talk with your doctor about your life goals, and what kind of medical care can help you attain these goals, is an extremely important part of health care for anyone with a chronic illness such as heart failure," says Dr. Chittenden. Providing an advance directive tells your doctors and emergency physicians what level of care you want, should you not be able to speak for yourself. It reflects your innermost values, especially what trade-offs you are willing to make to stay alive. If length of life is most important to you, you may be willing to accept more technology than if quality of life and being at home are your primary desires, she explains.

“Discussing these wishes and decisions with those who are closest to you is equally important, because one of them may need to make decisions for you in the event of an emergency,” she adds.

In addition to an advance directive, there are two measures you can take to ensure your wishes are respected.