

Advance Directives in Memory Loss

Value Judgments and Alzheimer's Disease

Our personal values reflect our attitudes toward the things we care about. We make choices every day that reveal our values: we choose where to live, how much to spend and save, whether to cross the street in the middle of the block or at the intersection.

Our values play an important role in all our decisions about health care. We often recognize that a choice that is good in one area of life is bad in another area. For example, moving from a family home into an assisted-living facility may improve an older person's safety, nutrition, and opportunities for socializing but at the same time cause the loss of cherished memories and independence.

In dementia, the ability to communicate values and to participate in decisions is progressively lost. Our best idea about how to make the decision that the person would have made for herself or himself as the person she or he once was. This is called "substituted judgment" by ethicists and lawyers.

It is therefore critically important to talk with the person who has the memory problem as early as possible, while he or she is still able to discuss values and the choices that may lie ahead in the future. In general, decisions about a person's health care should reflect the values of the person affected.

***Important Issues
to Discuss***

Here are some important issues that you should consider:

- Is life still worth living if you become very mentally impaired (for example, you cannot talk and do not recognize your family)?
- If your heart were to stop now, would you want doctors to try to bring you back?
- Would you want to be fed by a tube if you couldn't eat for yourself because of a progressively worse memory problem (for instance, you forget how to swallow)?
- Is independence (living alone, doing things for yourself without depending on another's assistance) more important to you than your safety?
- Would you want to make your own decisions, no matter how bad they might be? Or would you want your family to step in to do the best thing?
- Who in your family would you trust to make your decisions for you?

***Advance
Directives***

Documents called “advance directives” are available in most states to allow you to choose what care you would accept and whom you want to make decisions for you if you ever become unable to make them for yourself. The doctor or your local hospital is a good source for these documents.

The American Hospital Association-sponsored Web site www.putitinwriting.org also has helpful information, links to state-specific advance directives, and a simple-to-use form for developing your own advance directive.