

Advanced Health Directives

Introduction

Advance directives are legal documents that allow patients to plan and communicate their end-of-life care choices before they become too ill, incapacitated, or unable to make decisions for themselves. These directives are critical for ensuring that patients' interests and values are upheld, and they also provide peace of mind to families and healthcare providers. As such, it is important for nurses to be knowledgeable about advance directives and to help patients understand their importance and how to complete them. In this paper, we will explore what advance directives are, their types, and use, as well as the role of nurses in supporting and implementing them.

Types of advance directives

There are two primary types of advance directives: living wills and durable power of attorney for health care. A living will is a document that outlines a patient's end-of-life care preferences, including whether they want to receive life-sustaining treatments such as mechanical ventilation, tube feedings, or dialysis. It also provides guidance about comfort measures, pain management, and spiritual or emotional support. Living wills are not universally recognized in all states, and they have some limitations, particularly in situations involving unexpected health crises or conditions not covered by the document.

Durable power of attorney for health care, on the other hand, is a legal document that designates a trusted person to make healthcare decisions on behalf of the patient if they become incapacitated or unable to make decisions for themselves. The person appointed can be a spouse, family member, or close friend, and they are authorized to make decisions based on the patient's wishes and best interests. Patients can also give their proxy specific guidelines as to how they want their medical care to be managed, including what treatments to receive or not to receive, which doctors to use, and where they would like to receive care.

Importance of advance directives

The importance of advance directives cannot be overstated. They are essential for ensuring that patients receive the type of care that they want, and they also prevent family members from making uninformed decisions about their loved one's healthcare. Moreover, if patients are unable to make decisions for themselves, advance directives decrease the likelihood of disputes amongst family members or between

family members and healthcare providers. In some cases, they may also simplify and speed up the decision-making process, reduce costs, and minimize unnecessary or unwanted medical procedures.

Role of nurses in advance directive education and implementation

As frontline healthcare providers, nurses play a vital role in educating patients about advance directives and ensuring that they are completed and implemented properly. Below are four key responsibilities that nurses have in this process:

1. **Discussing Advance Directives with patients:** Nurses can play a critical role in discussing advance directives with patients, including the benefits of completing them and the different legal documents. They can explain the meaning of terms like “life-sustaining treatments” or “resuscitation,” and assist in clarifying what treatments patients may or may not want to receive.
2. **Giving patients necessary resources:** Nurses should provide patients with written advance directive information that is appropriate for their level of understanding. They should also explain any questions that patients may have and explain how to discuss their preferences with their healthcare providers.
3. **Documenting patients’ direct wishes:** Nurses have to document patients’ advance directive preferences to ensure that all staff members involved in patient care are aware of their end-of-life care preferences, have access to the document, and know how to follow it.
4. **Advocating for patient wishes:** When a patient is incapable of making their end-of-life care decisions, nurses should be their advocate. As the first point of contact, they can be the patient's voice and ensure that their preferences are respected.

Conclusion

Advance directives are a vital part of healthcare as they allow patients to have control over their end-of-life care. They also provide comfort to family members and healthcare providers. As a nurse, it is essential to understand what advance directives are, their types, and their importance. This knowledge allows nurses to educate their patients about advance directives and assist them in the completion process. Nurses' advocacy and commitment to ensuring that patients’ preferences are respected are crucial in implementing advance directives. They should document the patients’ wishes and make sure that healthcare providers follow them.