

For Healthcare Agents Role and Responsibilities¹

Being a health care agent may be one of the most important roles anyone can carry out. It is a way to fulfill a request made by a loved one or close friend to be sure that his or her wishes about receiving care are carried out when he or she can no longer make decisions about his or her care for him or herself.

How do I become a healthcare agent?

Health care agents are typically chosen when a person completes a **Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare**. The **Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare** (DPOAHC) is a legal document naming someone 18 years or older who is close to them and who has agreed to carry out their healthcare wishes at a time when they are longer able to make decisions about their care for themselves.

As a Healthcare Agent, you should

- **be willing to do this for your loved one.**
 - **It is okay to say no if you are not comfortable with this responsibility.**
 - **understand what your loved one wants for healthcare, including at the end of life.**
 - **understand your loved one's values and what "living well" (quality of life) means to them.**
 - **follow what your loved one wants (rather than making decisions based on your own values).**
 - **be able to make decisions under sometimes stressful conditions.**
- *Becoming a Healthcare Agent does NOT mean you have financial responsibility for your loved one.*

What will I do as a Healthcare Agent?

Your role as your loved one's decision-maker is only in effect when they cannot speak for themselves.

You will be able to talk with your loved one's doctors about various treatment choices.

Your decisions will be based on what you know about your loved one's wishes, what they have told you and what is written in advance directives -- or how you feel your loved one would make certain choices.

Over →

¹ Much of this information was drawn from <http://www.permanente.net/homepage/kaiser/pdf/44668.pdf>

WAHA End of Life Choices

Take time to talk with your loved one so that you understand what they would prefer for future medical care, including end-of-life care.

What types of decisions will you be asked to make?

Your loved one's healthcare providers will help you understand what is involved in any proposed treatment or procedure. They will talk with you about the risks, benefits, and other options. Your task as agent will be to make choices based on what your loved one would probably choose if he or she were well enough to participate, *even if it is not what you would choose for yourself*.

These decisions may include:

- Use of a breathing machine or ventilator. A ventilator pumps air into the lungs and breathes for someone when they can no longer breathe normally.
- Surgical operations or procedures.
- Starting, changing, or stopping certain medications.
- Use of artificial nutrition and hydration (tubes placed to give a person food and water) when your loved one can no longer swallow food.
- Whether to give blood transfusions.
- Use of CPR (Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation) to restart the heart.
- Deciding where your loved one spends his or her final days (at home, in the hospital, or elsewhere).
- Donating organs or tissues, authorizing an autopsy, or making decisions about what will be done with the body upon death.

Making the tough health care decisions – end of life care

There may come a time when your loved one's condition worsens and it is clear he or she will not get better. When that time comes, you may be asked to make decisions about starting or stopping life-support treatments. These are the toughest decisions you may have to make. It can be emotionally difficult knowing that the decisions that are required might result in your loved one's death.

More than ever you will need to draw upon your loved one's stated or expressed wishes, his or her outlook on life, values, and spirituality to decide how he or she would want to spend the final days of his or her life. When the time comes, you will not have to face these decisions alone. Doctors, nurses, social workers, ethics committees, and other staff will help answer your questions and discuss treatment options.

There is help to provide the emotional support you may need to carry out your loved one's wishes.