

ADVANCE CARE PLANNING DISCUSSION SCRIPT

The following script provides an example of how you might discuss a patient's concerns and needs about advance care. You may want to use this script in a role-playing exercise, alone or with another person, in order to experiment with and individualize the wording and phrasing. You may notice that you are more comfortable in these discussions after practice with this and similar scripts.

Mrs. Jones has come in for a routine examination:

"Mrs. Jones, I'd like to talk with you about something I try to discuss with all of my patients. It's called advance care planning. In fact, I feel that this is such an important topic that I have done this myself, with my own physician. Are you familiar with advance care planning?"

"Have you thought about the type of medical care you would like to have if you ever became too sick to speak for yourself? That is the purpose of advance care planning, to ensure that you are cared for the way you would want to be, even in times when communication may be impossible..."

"There is no change in your health that we have not already discussed. I am bringing this up now because it is prudent for everyone, no matter what his or her age or state of health, to plan for the future...."

"Advance care planning will help both of us to understand your values and goals for health care if you were to become critically ill. Eventually we may put your choices into a written document that I would make part of your patient record. We call this document an advance directive, and it would only be used if you were to lose the capacity to make decisions on your own, either temporarily or permanently...."

"Would you like to talk further about the kind of care you would want to have if you were no longer able to express your own wishes?"

"I also like to ask my patients if they have someone that they would like to identify to act on their behalf in the event that they are unable to express their own wishes. This person could be a relative or a friend. Is there someone whom you would want to be part of our discussion and whom you might want to have act on your behalf?..."

"Here is a copy of the form that I would like to use to structure our conversation. We will talk about it in more depth the next time we meet. Please think about it, talk with your family, and write down any questions you have. Also, next time please bring anyone with you whom you want to include in our discussion...."

Next Visit:

Ask questions about specific scenarios. Start by asking about a persistent vegetative state.

"Mrs Jones, I suggest we start by considering a few examples as a way of getting to know your thinking. I will use examples that I use for everyone. Let's try to imagine several circumstances. We will go through 4 and then perhaps another 1 or 2. First, imagine you were in a coma with no awareness. Assume there was a slight chance that you might wake up and be yourself again, but it was not likely. Some people would want us to withdraw treatment and let them die, others would want us to attempt everything possible, and yet others would want us to try to restore health, but stop treatment and allow death if it were not working. What do you think you would want under these circumstances?"

Then ask Mrs. Jones similar questions about 3 other scenarios:

Onset of coma from which there is a chance of recovery, but with significant disability

Onset of dementia when there is already an advanced life-threatening illness

Onset of dementia with no other life-threatening diagnosis

If she is already experiencing a significant illness, ask Mrs. Jones questions specific to her current illness:

"We should also consider the situations that your particular illness can cause; that way you can be confident we will do what you want. For sure, all people are different and you may never face these circumstances. Nevertheless, let's imagine . . ."

"People sometimes think about circumstances they have seen or heard about. Some may seem worse than death. Do you ever think about such circumstances?"

Finally, ask Mrs. Jones about how she would like to handle a sudden critical illness that is life threatening.

"Well, we've gone through several scenarios now. It seems to me that you feel particularly strongly about . . . Indeed, you move from wanting intervention to wanting to be allowed to die in peace at the point when . . . Do I speak for you correctly if I say that your personal threshold for deciding to let go is . . .?"

"I think you have given a good picture of particular decisions you would want. Can you also say something about the values or beliefs that you hold? Understanding your more general views can be an important part of getting specific decisions right."

Next Visit:

"Mrs. Jones, have you and . . . [your proxy/family member] had a chance to continue the discussion we started 2 weeks ago? I see you have a completed statement now. Let's review your preferences."

"I am glad we went through this planning process together. I have a much better idea of what matters to you than I did before, and that will help me to be a good physician for you — in general, as well as in case of serious illness."

"If you feel ready to, we can write down your preferences, and all 3 of us can sign this document and make it official. Then we will put it into your medical record and give you copies to take home."

Two Years Later:

"Mrs. Jones, 2 years have gone by since we completed your advance care plans, and in that time a lot has happened. People sometimes change their wishes, so let's review the wishes you wrote down a year ago."

"Your choices have changed on a couple of your earlier decisions when we reviewed your statement, even though we have discussed the issues quite a lot. You have already said that you want . . . [proxy/family member] to be your proxy. Would you prefer to give these few decisions over to him/her to decide according to what he/she thinks would be in your best interests?"

"For the remaining decisions, about which you are clear and firm, would you like . . . [proxy/family member] to stick closely to them, or would you prefer to give him/her room to make changes if he/she thinks your best interests would be better served by a different decision?"

National Cancer Institute grant (R25 CA76449) to Sara J. Knight, Ph.D., at the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center provided the funding for the development of this program. This material was adapted from the EPEC project (Education for Physicians on End-of-life Care).