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Advance-care planning, included in health bills

The heated debate about health care reform is fraught with misinformation about how legislation will affect access to and cost of medical services. Especially disturbing is the notion of "death panels" purportedly deciding which patients receive care at the end of life. In fact, the health-care reform bill includes an advance-care planning provision (Section 1233) that allows individuals to take charge of their own care decisions.

Advance-care planning allows individuals to spell out their choices when facing a life-limiting illness. Under Medicare, the health-care reform bill covers consultation with a medical professional to gather information and make informed decisions regarding care choices. Consultation is covered every five years, or when a major health situation presents itself, including diagnosis of a terminal illness or admission to a hospice program.

Nothing in the advance-care planning provision suggests limitations on care, the inability to make choices, care based on cost savings or a hastening of death. In fact, if individuals choose to pursue an aggressive course of treatment throughout a life-threatening illness, those wishes will be expressed in the directive and followed. Similarly, a person may choose to pursue comfort measures only and be admitted to hospice care.

Advance-care planning as provided for in the health-care reform bill, including advance directives such as a living will and health care proxy, helps preserve patient dignity and save families the turmoil of having to make difficult decisions.

Kate Colburn

Executive Director, Hospice & Palliative Care of Westchester
