

POSITION PAPER ON ADVANCE DIRECTIVES

The American Medical Women's Association, a national organization of women physicians and medical students, is dedicated to the promotion of ethical principles of medical practice, particularly as they apply to health care issues involving women.

The population of the United States is aging and predicted to increase by 20% early in the next century.^{1,2} Women will represent a disproportionately large segment of the population.^{3,4}

Although advanced directives (living wills and durable power of attorney for health care) should be formulated by all patients early in life, they are particularly applicable to elderly patients. Statistics show that the majority of these patients will be women.³

The purpose of advanced directives is to ensure that each patient's right to self-determination in their health care decision making is honored.

AMWA therefore advocates the following:

1. All physicians should be familiar with their state laws governing advanced directives.
2. Ideally, it is the responsibility of the primary physician to educate his or her patients irrespective of age, health status, diagnoses, or finances regarding the health care choices available to them prior to formulating their advanced directives.
3. The information should be presented to the patient in emotionally neutral terms.
4. At the time of making advanced directives, patients should be made aware of all the options including the right to medical treatments, and their decisions should be made freely and without coercion and that a patient should be encouraged to discuss these decisions with their immediate family or significant others.
5. The education process should begin as early or feasible in the physician-patient relationship.
6. Patients should be informed that they are free to change their advanced directives at any time.
7. Once advanced directives are formulated, they should be reviewed periodically at appropriate intervals.
8. In a crisis situation when the patient is unable to communicate, guardians, relatives of individuals who have evidence of the patient's wishes prior to their illness, should be informed of the patient's condition and helped to make appropriate health care decisions.

Adopted by the House of Delegates

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References

1. Berry, Jon. Healthy, Wealthy and Growing in Numbers. *Brandweek* Feb. 22, 1993; 34:32.
2. Holden, Constance. Changing U.S. Demography. *Science* April 20, 1990; 248:307.
3. *Information Please Almanac, Atlas and Yearbook*. 46th ed. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993; 831.
4. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*. New York, World Almanac, 1993; 385.