

## Informed Consent and Patient Rights in End-of-Life Healthcare

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### DESCRIPTION

Patient autonomy and informed consent are central principles in modern healthcare and they become especially significant at the end of life. As individuals face serious or terminal illnesses, medical decisions often involve complex choices about treatments, comfort and personal values. Respecting a patient's right to make decisions about their own body and care is essential to preserving dignity, trust and ethical integrity in healthcare. At the same time, ensuring that consent is truly informed requires clear communication, compassion and sensitivity to emotional and cultural factors.

Patient autonomy refers to the right of individuals to make decisions about their own medical care based on their values, beliefs and preferences. At the end of life, this principle empowers patients to participate actively in decisions such as whether to continue aggressive treatments, focus on comfort-oriented care, or decline certain medical interventions. Autonomy recognizes that patients are not merely recipients of care but individuals with unique perspectives on what makes life meaningful. Honoring autonomy helps ensure that medical care aligns with the patient's personal definition of quality of life rather than solely with clinical goals.

Informed consent is closely connected to autonomy and involves providing patients with accurate, understandable information about their diagnosis, treatment options, potential benefits, risks and likely outcomes. At the end of life, informed consent can be challenging because information is often complex and emotionally difficult to process. Patients may be dealing with fear, grief, or uncertainty, which can affect their ability to fully understand medical details. Healthcare professionals therefore have a responsibility to communicate honestly while also offering emotional support, allowing patients time to ask questions and reflect on their choices.

One of the key challenges in end-of-life decision-making is balancing medical expertise with respect for patient preferences. Physicians may recommend certain treatments based on clinical evidence, but patients may prioritize comfort, independence, or time with family over life-prolonging interventions. Respecting informed consent means acknowledging that a patient's values

may differ from those of healthcare providers or even family members. When patients are given clear information and supported in decision-making, they are better able to express their wishes and feel a sense of control during a vulnerable period.

Advance care planning plays an important role in protecting patient autonomy at the end of life. Tools such as advance directives and living wills allow individuals to document their preferences before they become unable to communicate them. These documents guide healthcare providers and families in making decisions that reflect the patient's wishes. Advance care planning also encourages conversations about goals of care, helping reduce confusion and conflict during critical moments. When patients have clearly expressed their preferences in advance, informed consent can still be respected even if the patient can no longer speak for themselves.

Family involvement is another important aspect of end-of-life care, but it can also create ethical tension. Loved ones often want what they believe is best for the patient, yet their views may not always match the patient's expressed wishes. Respecting patient autonomy requires that healthcare providers prioritize the patient's choices, even when family members disagree. Sensitive communication is essential in these situations to help families understand the patient's perspective and the ethical obligation to honor it.

Cultural, religious and social factors also influence how patients view autonomy and consent. Some individuals prefer shared decision-making with family or community members rather than making choices independently. Respecting autonomy does not mean forcing patients to decide alone; instead, it means honoring how they wish decisions to be made. Healthcare professionals must be culturally aware and flexible, ensuring that informed consent reflects the patient's values while still meeting ethical and legal standards.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, patient autonomy and informed consent are fundamental to ethical end-of-life care. They ensure that medical decisions respect the individual's values, dignity and right to self-determination. By providing clear information, encouraging

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open communication and supporting advance care planning, healthcare providers can help patients navigate difficult choices with confidence and respect. Upholding these principles not

only improves the quality of care but also affirms the humanity of patients at one of the most important stages of life.