Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Orders

A recent letter to the Editor in the Columbus Dispatch has spurred many of my clients to ask about Do Not Resuscitate Orders (DNR).

Many people have Health Care Powers of Attorney to appoint an agent to make health care decisions for them or a living will to express that they do not want to remain on life support. A DNR is a third type of document which is a medical order that only a physician or other authorized person may write. It is generally a document that someone in a terminal condition will consider.

What does DNR mean?
Under Ohio law there are two types of DNR orders. These standardized DNR orders allow patients to choose the extent of the treatment they wish to receive at the end of life. A patient with a DNR Comfort Care-Arrest Order will receive all the appropriate medical treatment, including resuscitation, until the patient has a cardiac arrest (heart has stopped beating) or pulmonary arrest (breathing has stopped), at which point comfort care will be provided. By requesting a DNR Comfort Care Order (DNR-CC), a patient chooses other measures such as drugs to correct abnormal heart rhythms. With this order, comfort care or other requested treatment is provided at a point before the heart or breathing stops. Comfort care (also called symptom management or palliative care) involves keeping the patient comfortable with pain medication and providing palliative (supportive medical) care. A DNR-CC does not mean “do not treat.”

Your doctor can explain the differences in the types of DNR orders and help you decide if one or the other may be appropriate.

How do I make my wishes about CPR known? How do I get a DNR order?
If you do want to receive CPR when it is medically appropriate, you do not have to do anything. Emergency squads and other health care providers must provide CPR if you stop breathing or your heart stops beating. If you do not want CPR, you always have the right to refuse it (or any other medical treatment), but you may not be able to state your wishes when an emergency happens. Therefore, if you do not want CPR, you should speak with your doctor about your wishes, and whether it would be appropriate for you to have a DNR order.

How will the emergency squad or others know I have a DNR order?
It is wise to provide your doctor and your local hospital with a copy of your health care power of attorney, living will and DNR identification form before an emergency arises. If you are a patient in a hospital or nursing home, the DNR order should be in your medical chart. You or your family also should notify the medical staff that you have such an order any time you are admitted to a facility or are transferred from one facility to another. If you are receiving care at home, you should tell your family and caregivers where to find your DNR order and post it in an easy-to-find place, such as your refrigerator door. You also may want to ask your doctor about getting DNR identification such as a wallet card or bracelet that tells medical personnel you have a DNR order.

What is the difference between a living will and a DNR order?
Both living wills and DNR orders deal with end-of-life decisions, but they are different. You may complete a living will document yourself even when you are healthy. Your living will document specifies in advance the kind of medical treatment you would want if and when you have a terminal illness or are in a permanently unconscious state and are no longer able to state your own wishes.
Unlike a living will, you do not write a DNR order for yourself. Instead, you make your wishes known to your doctor, who writes a DNR order if and when your condition warrants it. The DNR order addresses your current state of health and the kind of medical treatment you and your physician decide is appropriate under current circumstances.

**How are DNR orders, living wills and health care powers of attorney used?**
A living will might be used to direct a physician to write a DNR order. For example:

Jane decides she does not want to receive CPR. She obtains a living will form and completes it properly. Later, Jane becomes debilitated and needs home health care, but has not discussed resuscitation with her doctor and a specific DNR order has not been written. One day, the visiting nurse finds that Jane is not breathing. At this point, the nurse begins CPR, because a DNR order has not been written. If Jane is resuscitated and transferred to a hospital, her doctors may write a DNR order, but only if they decide she is terminally ill or permanently unconscious. Jane’s living will can serve as evidence that she does not want to be resuscitated in such a circumstance. Her doctor may write a DNR order so that, if Jane's heart stops beating again, she will not be resuscitated.

A health care power of attorney might be used to authorize a DNR order. For example:

Bill decides that, under some circumstances, he would not want to receive CPR and informs his family of this decision. He completes a health care power of attorney form, appointing his wife to make health care decisions for him if he is unable to do so. Later, Bill is seriously injured in an accident and is moved to a hospital while he is unconscious. Bill’s wife shows the doctors the health care power of attorney document and explains that Bill would not want CPR if his heart or lungs should stop functioning. The doctors write a DNR “CC-Arrest” order, indicating on Bill’s medical chart that he is not to be resuscitated if he dies, but that he should receive aggressive medical treatment before that time. Bill receives treatment including medicine, a breathing tube and other resuscitative measures, until his heart stops. At that point, the health care workers do not try to resuscitate him.

A DNR order alone might be used, as in the following example:

John is chronically ill and decides he does not want to receive CPR, although he wants limited medical treatment. He talks with his doctor, who writes a “DNR-CC” order on the DNR Identification Form provided by the Ohio Department of Health, signs it, and gives it to John. Later, John needs home health care. He tells his family about his DNR order and gives them a copy. One day, his daughter finds that John is having trouble breathing. She calls 9-1-1, and shows the DNR order to the medic who arrives. The medic transports John to the hospital, where he is treated with antibiotics for pneumonia and is sent back home. A week later, John stops breathing. His daughter calls 9-1-1, and again shows the DNR order to the medic. This time, since John has stopped breathing, the squad does not resuscitate him, although John receives comfort care.

**Where can I get further information? Can I draw up my own documents?**
You cannot draw up your own DNR order. Instead, you will need to speak with your doctor, who can complete the appropriate forms for the order, and can tell you how to obtain a wallet card, bracelet or other DNR identification.

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