The Role of the Substitute Decision Maker

A substitute decision maker is a person or persons who will inform the care team about a resident’s wishes, if the resident is unable to do so themselves.\[1\] The substitute decision maker must understand and represent the resident’s wishes for medical care, and be able to provide consent for treatments. The role of the substitute decision maker is to help communicate the resident’s medical wishes to the healthcare provider, and NOT their own wishes for the resident.

Within the limits of medical possibilities, it is the wishes of the resident that always matter.

Being prepared for a medical emergency

Emergency situations happen, and a resident may be unable to decide on treatment choices. If this happens, the long-term care (LTC) team members will contact the resident’s substitute decision maker and ask what the resident would desire.

Information shared by the LTC home care team may include:

- What happened to the resident
- What could happen next
- Any medical choices or decisions that need to be made
- Previous conversations regarding the resident’s values and wishes for medical care

The substitute decision maker will be asked something like: “Based on your knowledge of the person’s values, wishes, health, and quality of life, what would the person want (and not want) in this situation?”

When contacted about an emergency, the substitute decision maker should:

- Write down notes from conversations with the LTC home care team
- Ask questions

If there is time, the substitute decision maker and others can go to the LTC home to talk with team members in person. Remember, the final say on what treatments are used should come from the substitute decision maker’s understanding of what the resident would wish for in the situation at hand.

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