HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS’ KNOWLEDGE OF ADVANCE DIRECTIVES
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ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Recently widely publicized cases involving end of life care have brought the topic of advance directives to the forefront of the general population. Advance directives are usually used to avoid prolonging an inevitable dying process. However, despite the publicity given to the ethical dilemmas, it is estimated that 80% of the public does not have advance directives in place. Studies have been conducted to probe patients’ knowledge of advance directives, but not the awareness of healthcare providers. Other studies have focus on the attitudes of healthcare providers towards advance directives. However, studies have not been conducted to directly examine healthcare providers’ understanding of advance directives or how this affects the likelihood of discussing the subject with patients. This combination of facts puts forth the question, are most health care professionals knowledgeable enough on the subject of advance directives to address these matters with their patients? This cross-sectional study was conducted to both assess healthcare providers’ knowledge and attitudes of advance directives.

**Methods:** The population of this study consisted of healthcare providers and healthcare students from both a 2005 state physician assistance conference and local private practices. A two-part survey was distributed to subjects, the first part examining the subject’s knowledge of advance directives, the second part examining personal attitudes on advance directives. Associations between the type of profession (physician, midlevel practitioner, nurse, student, or other) and answers were analyzed using ANOVA, general linear model and logistic regression.

**Results:** Respondents included students (30.1%), nurses (6.8%) physician assistants (47.9%), nurse practitioners (4.1%), and physicians (11.0%). Among all survey respondents, the mean correct score was 2.99 (SD = 0.95) out of a possible 5 points. The majority (56.2%) of subjects believed that a healthcare professional was the responsible party in helping patients to create advance directives. About 12% of respondents said that they tried to discuss advanced directives with every patient. There was no statistical difference in knowledge scores between the four types of providers. There was no relationship found between knowledge score and attitudes toward responsibility, or knowledge score and personal practices in discussing advance directives.

**Conclusions:** Studies have not been previously published analyzing healthcare providers’ knowledge of advance directives and influence on their attitudes toward responsibility and personal practices regarding advance directives. Although our study did not show a relationship between knowledge and willingness to discuss advance directives, it did show that the average knowledge score could use improvement. Patients may not know what an advance directive is or where to start if they do. Because advance directives are meant to be guidelines for medical care, it is important that healthcare providers are well-informed on the subject and not only able to educate and provide resources for patients, but are capable of initiating conversation on the subject.