Distinctive Factors Affecting the Legal Context of End-Of-Life Medical Care For Older Persons

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INTRODUCTION

Current legal regulation of medical care for individuals approaching the end of life in the United States is predicated essentially on a factual model emanating from a series of high-profile judicial opinions concerning the rights of adults who become either permanently unconscious or are clearly going to die soon with or without aggressive attempts of curative therapy. For jurisprudential pioneers such as Karen Quinlan, Nancy Cruzan, Claire Conroy, Nancy Jobes, and more recently Theresa Schiavo, the questions presented for adjudication revolved around the discrete withholding or withdrawal of specific life-sustaining medical interventions such as artificial feeding, respirators, dialysis, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or antibiotics.

In many of today’s difficult medical situations, however, this prevailing, dramatic pull-the-plug end-of-life paradigm does not fit very neatly. Key decisions often fall outside the narrow withholding or withdrawing category, as multiple, seemingly non-dramatic but ultimately interconnected, decisions need to be made when the patient’s survival and recovery prognosis is uncertain. As lifespans...
increase, death often is preceded by long periods of very gradual decline, chronic illness, and an extension of the dying process, the timeline of which cannot be predicted with any real precision. For example, “in many cases, the decision about whether or not to attempt to resuscitate a patient may be only a footnote to the overall plan for end-of-life care.”

The need for a flexible, adaptable approach to medically treating people approaching the end of their lives, and a similar openness to possible modification of the legal framework within which treatment choices are made and implemented, are particularly important when older individuals are involved. Of the approximately 2.5 million people who die each year in the U.S., about three-quarters of deaths occur among persons aged sixty-five and older. An Institute of Medicine report places these deaths into useful perspective as follows:

In contrast to nonelderly decedents, death among the elderly is most likely to occur after a diagnosis of advanced older persons is beyond the scope of this article. See Christina White, Physician Aid-in-Dying, 53 Houston L. Rev. 595, 622–23 (2015); David Orentlicher, Aging Populations and Physician Aid in Dying: The Evolution of State Government Policy, 48 Ind. L. Rev. 111 (2014).


12. See Sue Westwood, “I May Be Older, But I Ain’t No ’Elder’”: A Critique of “Elder Law”, 21 Temp. Pol. & Civ. Rts. L. Rev. 485, 505–06 (2012). In deference to the extreme sensitivity about language on the part of some advocates and commentators, in this article the current politically incorrect terms “elder” and “elderly” will be avoided in favor of the more palatable term “older.” Id.

13. Shepherd, supra note 1. Shepherd uses the example of President Obama’s 86-year-old mother and her decision to undergo hip replacement surgery after a fall had caused a hip fracture, despite her physicians’ predictions that she was going to die shortly because of terminal cancer. Id. at 1717–18.

chronic illness as opposed to a sudden, unexpected death. Of all deaths in 2011 among persons aged 65 and older, 26 percent were due to heart disease, 22 percent to cancer, 7 percent to chronic lower respiratory diseases, 6 percent to stroke, and 5 percent to Alzheimer’s disease. For the one-quarter of all deaths among the nonelderly, a much larger proportion is due to accidents, homicide, suicide, or acute episodes of illness.15

As stated succinctly by historian Jill Lepore, “[t]he longer we live, the longer we die.”16

This article outlines a few of the most salient clinical and social factors that distinguish the large and growing cohort of older persons,17 in potentially legally and policy relevant ways, from other population groups for whom end-of-life medical treatment choices may come into play. Some practice and policy implications are alluded to briefly.

DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF END-OF-LIFE MEDICAL TREATMENT DECISIONS FOR OLDER PERSONS

1. Prevalence of Cognitive or Affective Impairments and Its Impact on Decision Making

There is a significantly higher prevalence rate of cognitive, and often affective, impairment among older individuals than ordinarily would be found in the younger population.18 As observed by one commentator:

15. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 456.
17. Id. at 35.
As society ages, the number of elderly with cognitive deficits will also increase. While cognitive decline is commonly associated with normal aging, an additional subset of the population experiences an increased burden of cognitive and functional deficits resulting from neurodegenerative conditions. Age-associated neurodegenerative diseases include Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, and multiple classes of dementia.\footnote{Id.}

Many older persons function adequately for a period of time with mild cognitive impairment.\footnote{Ronald C. Petersen, \textit{Mild Cognitive Impairment}, 364 N. ENG. J. MED. 2227, 2227 (2011); Serge Gauthier et al., \textit{Mild Cognitive Impairment}, 367 LANCET 1262, 1262 (2006).} However, “functional decline, like cognitive decline, exists on a continuum from healthy aging to dementia.”\footnote{Cutter A. Lindbergh et al., \textit{Functional Disability in Mild Cognitive Impairment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis}, 26 NEUROPSYCHOL. REV. 129, 129 (2016).} The higher prevalence of moderate or severe cognitive or affective impairment among older individuals is likely to impact the decision-making process regarding medical treatment near the end of life in several important respects. First, although the ethical principle of autonomy (self-rule) has been firmly embedded as the most important cornerstone of modern American end-of-life jurisprudence,\footnote{See generally Kathryn L. Tucker, \textit{Give Me Liberty at My Death: Expanding End-of-Life Choice in Massachusetts}, 58 N.Y.L. SCH. L. REV. 259, 263 (2013/2014).} older patients likely lack sufficient present capacity to understand, manipulate, and appreciate the significance of information to engage fully autonomously in a rational decision-making process. It has been estimated that seventy percent of older adults facing treatment decisions in end-of-life scenarios are incapable of making those decisions by themselves.\footnote{IOM, \textit{DYING IN AMERICA}, supra note 14, at 189.}

A substantial percentage of older persons who lack adequate capacity to make and express their own legally valid decisions all by themselves may be capable of some level of assisted or supported decision making and, therefore, should be encouraged and helped to participate in the decision-making process as extensively as feasible.
in conjunction with family members or friends.\textsuperscript{24} Even when the impaired older person is able to participate, to some limited extent, in the decision-making process, the health care team or institution ultimately turn to a substitute decision maker\textsuperscript{25} for the purpose of obtaining legally valid decisions consenting to or declining particular medical interventions.\textsuperscript{26} Substitute decision making, either solely by the substitute or on a joint substitute-patient basis, occurs for nearly half of hospitalized older adults.\textsuperscript{27} The role of substitute decision maker for an incapacitated patient is a difficult emotional and intellectual one under even the best of circumstances.\textsuperscript{28} Research and experience have revealed problems in the operation of substituted decision making in the end-of-life context, and older people are especially ripe for potential harm when the mechanism fails to work properly and decisions made are not consistent with the patient’s wishes or best interests.\textsuperscript{29} The substitute decision-making process may fail either because the substitute does not know well enough the values and preferences of the patient, the substitute becomes emotionally overwrought and unable to make any decision on the patient’s behalf, or the substitute intentionally places its own conflicting interests ahead of those of the patient.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, improvements in how we select, communicate with, and support substitute decision makers should be a high priority for those

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\item \textsuperscript{25} The terms “substitute,” “surrogate,” and “proxy” decision maker often are used interchangeably, but in some states their meanings are distinguished for specific purposes. Compare, e.g., FLA. STAT. § 765.101(19) (2016) (defining a “proxy” as a person who has not been expressly designated to make health care decisions for a particular incapacitated individual, but who is authorized pursuant to the state’s default substitute decision maker statute to make health care decisions for that individual) with FLA. STAT. § 765.101(21) (2016) (defining “surrogate” as someone who is expressly designated by a principal to make health care decisions for the principal).
\item \textsuperscript{26} Alexia M. Torke et al., *Scope and Outcomes of Surrogate Decision Making Among Hospitalized Older Adults*, 174 JAMA INTERN. MED. 370, 371 (2014).
\item \textsuperscript{27} Id. at 374.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Yael Schenker et al., *I Don’t Want to Be the One Saying ‘We Should Just Let Him Die’: Intrapersonal Tensions Experienced by Surrogate Decision Makers in the ICU*, 27 J. GEN. INTERNAL MED. 1657, 1657 (2012).
\item \textsuperscript{30} Douglas B. White, *Strategies to Support Surrogate Decision Makers of Patients with Chronic Critical Illness*, 316 JAMA 35, 35 (2016).
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concerned with the rights and well-being of vulnerable elders at a time when they can protect themselves the least\footnote{31} and are “at heightened risk of poor-quality, high-cost end-of-life care” because they “have multiple chronic conditions, functional limitations, and frailty.”\footnote{32}

Special attention must be devoted to protect the legitimate interests of incapacitated older persons who lack an easily identifiable substitute decision maker because the incapacitated person lacks willing-and-able family members or friends and hence is “unbefriended.”\footnote{33} Physician commentator Atul Gawande laments the demise of the extended family and that, in the U.S., “old age and infirmity have gone from being a shared, multigenerational responsibility to a more or less private state—something experienced largely alone or with the aid of doctors and institutions.”\footnote{34}

Dr. Gawande’s pessimism about the devotion and attentiveness of American families’ notwithstanding, many older individuals are likely to have spouses, adult children, and even adult grandchildren who are capable, willing, and available to become involved in supporting or substituting for the patient’s decisions.\footnote{35} Moreover, older individuals have had a longer time, and more reason because of current or anticipated medical decline, to contemplate a future in which decisions must be made by a substitute acting in place of the individual.\footnote{36} “The higher rate [among the elderly] of any kind of consideration of end-of-life care reflects age-related increases in the prevalence of chronic illnesses, dementia, other cognitive

32. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 38.
34. ATUL GAWANDE, BEING MORTAL: MEDICINE AND WHAT MATTERS IN THE END 17 (2014).
impairments, frailty, and disability.” Some, but certainly not all, older individuals help family members or friends who may eventually act as substitute decision makers by formally documenting, before a crisis has arisen, their future medical treatment values and preferences in written advance instruction directives. Research suggests that encouraging the use of electronic patient portals might be one way to improve documentation of advance care planning discussions, at least in “middle-aged and technology savvy older adults.” Some older persons go further and relieve their families of the decision-making burden altogether by agreeing to have the physician write a Physician Order for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST), converting the patient’s future treatment wishes into the actionable format of a physician’s medical orders. Because older persons are the most likely population to suffer from advanced, irreversible illness and frailty, they are the most appropriate candidates for POLSTs.

Whether or not the patient executes formal advance directives or the physician writes a POLST based on the patient’s agreement, a growing percentage of elders do engage in [advance care planning] discussions, most often with family present, if given an opportunity to reflect on their goals, values, and beliefs; to articulate and document their treatment preferences; and to choose a

37. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 144.
38. See Jolien J. Glaudemans et al., Advance Care Planning in Primary Care, Only for Severely Ill Patients? A Structured Review, 32 FAM. PRACTICE 16, 20 (2015) (finding that only one-third of patients who died non-sudden deaths had executed an advance planning document).
42. Wolf II, supra note 41, at 81–82.
health care agent. Those who have these discussions are almost three times as likely to have their end-of-life wishes both known and followed, and their family members suffer significantly less stress, anxiety, and depression after their loved one’s death.\footnote{43}

The content of an older person’s advance planning discussions with intended substitute decision makers, as well as with the person’s physician and other health care professionals,\footnote{44} frequently is richer because the older person has had a longer lifetime during which to contemplate and develop a coherent set of pertinent values and goals for future medical treatment.\footnote{45} In the absence of a formal advance directive or a POLST written while the older person was still decisionally capable, the substitute decision maker may work with the person’s physician to create a POLST reflecting the individual’s expressed and inferred values and goals.\footnote{46}

2. Venues of Dying

Another distinguishing characteristic of older individuals in the end-of-life context relates to their venue for dying. Regional variations exist, but some national observations are possible. Like younger people, many older patients who die each year in the U.S.—approximately 25 percent in 2009—do so while being treated in an acute care hospital setting, often an intensive care unit of one kind or another, although this percentage appears to be declining.\footnote{47} In the same year, around 28 percent of the older population’s deaths took place in nursing homes, 33 percent in private residences, and another

\footnote{43} Minal S. Kale et al., End-of-Life Discussions with Older Adults, 64 J. AM. GERIATR. SOC’Y 1962, 1964 (2016) (finding that 61% of older adults report having discussed their preferences regarding end-of-life medical treatment with someone); see also IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 136 (citations omitted).

\footnote{44} See Noah & Feigenson, supra note 37 (discussing patient-physician communication in the end-of-life context).

\footnote{45} Id.

\footnote{46} Wolf I, supra note 41, at 66.

\footnote{47} IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 33.
14 percent elsewhere.\textsuperscript{48} The venue where older persons die, as well as the kind and quality of care they enjoy or suffer in those venues, is strongly influenced by the incentives exerted by the public financing programs on which most older persons are dependent.\textsuperscript{49} The influence of the Medicare program on how elders die is discussed below.\textsuperscript{50} Older individuals receiving long-term services and supports in either institutional or home- and community-based settings may be dually eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid;\textsuperscript{51} for them, specific state Medicaid provisions may be highly determinative of their dying experience.\textsuperscript{52}

Nursing homes deserve particular attention as a site for older person deaths.\textsuperscript{53} Nursing homes were the scene not only of 28 percent of older patient deaths in 2001, but they also accounted for 70 percent of people dying with advanced dementia.\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, an estimated 44 to 69 percent of nursing home patients are unable to make their own health care decisions.\textsuperscript{55} Palliative services are delivered to some dying nursing home residents, mainly through their enrollment in hospice programs.\textsuperscript{56} However, for most residents, a combination of general nursing home culture and the characteristics of nursing home residents increases the likelihood that conversations within nursing homes among residents, staff, and families about end-of-life treatment preferences may be poor or non-existent and that

\textsuperscript{48} Id.
\textsuperscript{49} Id. at 16.
\textsuperscript{50} See infra Section 4.
\textsuperscript{54} Id.
\textsuperscript{55} Kathleen T. Unroe et al., The IOM Report on Dying in America: A Call to Action for Nursing Homes, 16 J. AM. MED. DIRECTORS ASS’N 90, 91 (2015).
\textsuperscript{56} Hospice services also may be provided in assisted living facilities, private homes, and in-patient hospice facilities. Because hospice services are driven largely by the availability of Medicare payments, hospice is discussed at notes 81–93, infra, and accompanying text.
consequently, patient wishes often are not well-respected.\(^{57}\) Additionally,

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\text{[a]lthough nursing homes typically are a frail elderly person’s final residence, federal and state agencies and national accreditation agencies hold them to standards that can be more suitable to life-prolonging than to addressing quality of life and comfort near the end of life. As a result, “evidence indicates that nursing homes undertreat pain, especially in cognitively impaired and minority residents.”}^{58}
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For older individuals who die at home, either their own or that of relatives, care often is provided in the final part of life by a combination of formal providers, such as hospice, home health agencies, or independent home care workers, and informal providers, especially family members.\(^{59}\) “Family caregivers provide a wide range of essential and increasingly complex services for people with advanced serious illnesses and those nearing the end of life”,\(^{60}\) they may be paid\(^{61}\) or unpaid,\(^{62}\) but generally this workforce “is invisible; undertrained; and stressed physically, emotionally, and financially.”\(^{63}\) As emphasized by the Institute of Medicine:

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\text{Given an explicit choice, most people would prefer to spend their last weeks and days in their own home, free of}
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\(^{57}\) Gail L. Towsley et al., Conversations About End of Life: Perspectives of Nursing Home Residents, Family, and Staff, 18 J. PALLIATIVE MED. 421, 421 (2015).

\(^{58}\) IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 54–55.

\(^{59}\) Noah & Feigenson, supra note 36, at 741.

\(^{60}\) IOM, Dying in America, supra note 14, at 8.

\(^{61}\) Medicaid’s Cash & Counseling program, where available, permits beneficiaries to pay family members for caregiving services using public program dollars. 42 C.F.R. § 441.655 (2015). Family caregivers of seriously injured veterans may receive a stipend under the Veterans Affairs Program of Comprehensive Assistance to Family Caregivers. 38 U.S.C. § 1720G (2012).


\(^{63}\) IOM, Dying in America, supra note 14, at 8.
pain, clean and comfortable, and in control—not in emergency departments, hospitals, and critical care units away from family and familiar surroundings. . . [N]ew models of home and community health care delivery and improved communication technologies are making that choice increasingly possible; however, adequate support for family caregivers remains an unmet need.64

Regardless of the ultimate site of death, many older people experience multiple transitions as they approach the end of life between care settings, including between hospitals and nursing homes or private homes.65 Poorly managed transitions between care settings often implicate medication errors, disruptions in care planning, and failures to coordinate care.66

Transitions characterized by these deficits or those that are simply difficult for sick, confused patients and their families to manage are considered “burdensome.” Transitions between care settings can be confusing and overwhelming to patients, especially seriously ill patients, and their families and can result in preventable readmissions or emergency department visits. Often, appropriate follow-up referrals are not made, follow-up with relevant health care professionals is not sufficiently timely, psychological and social needs are not addressed, and potentially useful personnel such as social workers, pharmacists, health educators, and rehabilitation therapists are not engaged.67

64. Id. at 94. Regarding the growth of home- and community-based options for long-term services and supports, see generally Marshall B. Kapp, Home and Community-Based Long-Term Services and Supports: Health Reform’s Most Enduring Legacy?, 8 ST. LOUIS U. J. HEALTH L. & POL’Y 9 (2014).
65. IOM, Dying in America, supra note 14, at 53.
66. Id.
67. Id.
As a result of poorly coordinated care transitions, many older persons experience interventions, especially when they are sent to the hospital emergency department from home or the nursing home, that cause discomfort and produce little meaningful benefit.68

3. Existence of an Aging Network

Another distinctive aspect of aging in the U.S. that may exert some impact on end-of-life care and decision making is the existence, under the authorization of the Older Americans Act (OAA), of a National Aging Network to make certain services available to older persons.69 The federal Administration on Aging (AoA) awards OAA funds annually to State Units on Aging (SUAs)—generally, state offices or departments of aging—for nutrition and supportive home- and community-based services; disease prevention and health promotion services; elder rights programs, including long-term care ombudsman programs, legal services, and elder abuse prevention efforts; the National Family Caregiver Support Program; and the Native American Caregiver Support Program. States are divided into planning and service areas (PSAs) and the SUA grants OAA funds to the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) designated for each PSA based on the AAA’s determination of the needs of older persons in the PSA.70

Service agencies that are part of the aging network supported by an AAA with OAA funds may engage in activities relating to the end-of-life medical experiences of older clients.71 One example could involve older person’s rights agencies, particularly long-term care

70. Id.

http://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/gsulr/vol33/iss4/1
ombudsmen, engaging in advocacy efforts intended to assist older persons to know and assert their rights within the health care system. Another network service agency might move end-of-life conversation outside the community setting to engage and educate older persons in the community regarding advance medical planning activities, and then facilitate the accomplishment of those planning efforts. There currently is no counterpart to the OAA-funded National Aging Network or its activities for the younger population.

4. Medicare

Without at all diminishing the importance of the foregoing discussion of distinguishing factors, perhaps the key difference between younger and older people in this country in terms of age’s effect on end-of-life medical care and decision making is the existence of the Medicare program. Approximately 80 percent of deaths in the U.S. occur among the roughly 30 percent of the population covered by Medicare, the federal program that subsidizes certain health services primarily for older Americans. Approximately one-quarter of Medicare spending is incurred by individuals in their last year of life, with some difficult-to-explain differences among racial and ethnic groups. In short:

[T]he Medicare program is—and will remain—the

73. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 16.
74. 42 U.S.C. § 1395(c) (2012). Medicare also subsidizes certain health services, regardless of the patient’s age, for recipients of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and patients with End-Stage Renal Disease (ESRD). Id.
predominant payer for end-of-life care in the United States, primarily because of the older ages at which most Americans die. Moreover, Medicare’s role in shaping end-of-life care in the United States likely goes beyond the proportion of Americans who die as Medicare beneficiaries, given that older individuals are disproportionately likely to die from advanced illness as opposed to an accident or sudden acute event.77

The traditional Medicare program (Medicare Parts A and B) covers a broad range of preventive, acute, and post-acute services.78 Medicare Part D covers outpatient prescription drugs.79 Most notably for the present discussion, Part A has covered hospice since 1983— with no legislative modifications since then—for individuals with a terminal illness who have an expected prognosis of six months or less and who agree to forego curative treatment for the terminal condition.80 A significant and growing number of Medicare beneficiaries are enrolled in Medicare Advantage (Medicare Part C) fee-for-service or managed care plans, which receive a capitated payment from the government to cover all Parts A and B services plus any additional services that the particular plan offers.81

77. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 459. For a broader picture of major health and social programs available to people with serious advanced illnesses, see id. at 272–74 tbl.5.1.
79. Id. at 105.
80. Id. at 39. However, as geriatrician Muriel Gillick explains:

Some hospices have developed an “open access” model of care, in which they do not require patients to forgo these types of interventions [like blood transfusions, which can be both life-prolonging and comfort-promoting]. Typically they are larger hospices that balance the financial loss they incur from a small number of patients using expensive resources against the profit they earn from a large number of patients with less resource-intensive needs.

Muriel R. Gillick, How Medicare Shapes the Way We Die, 8 J. HEALTH & BIOMEDICAL L. 27, 31 (2012). Additionally, even if hospice care has been elected, Medicare will pay for curative care for a condition that is unrelated to the hospice-qualifying diagnosis. MEDICARE & YOU 2016, supra note 79, at 39.
81. MEDICARE & YOU 2016, supra note 78, at 83.
There are several ways in which present Medicare payment policies impede the provision of optimal medical care, or even affirmatively incentivize inappropriate forms of care, for dying older individuals. Most importantly, “[b]y paying generously for high-tech, hospital-based care, often to the detriment of ‘high touch’ treatment, Medicare has fostered an aggressive approach to end-of-life care.”82 The Institute of Medicine stated the problem more expansively:

> Although it can be difficult to discern the extent to which financing and payment alone lead to shortcomings in the provision of end-of-life care, researchers and other stakeholders often point to systemic incentives of the traditional Medicare program when discussing challenges such as burdensome, high-intensity treatments delivered at the end of life.83

Part of the frequently excessive aggressiveness of end-of-life treatment for many older patients may be attributed to the set of incentives created by the Medicare program to hospitalize older patients as they closely approach death.84 First, even when families want to keep their loved one at home during the dying process and are willing to undertake enormous personal and financial sacrifices as caregivers in order to do so, the needs of the totally dependent dying person may overpower the family’s capacity to maintain the person at home.85 The Medicare hospice benefit is underutilized, at least by individuals in traditional Parts A and B Medicare.86

82. Gillick, supra note 80, at 35.
83. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 460–61 (citations omitted); but see id. at 466: Relative to the traditional Medicare (TM) program . . . , providers serving the nearly 30 percent of beneficiaries enrolled in the Medicare Advantage (MA) program may be better positioned to promote the use of recommended services at the end of life while discouraging the use of unnecessary invasive procedures. MA plans generally are paid on a per-person—rather than a per-service—basis, thereby rewarding plan efforts to manage chronic disease and to minimize unnecessary treatment intensity at the end of life.
84. Id. at 466.
85. Id. at 51.
86. It may be different when a person is enrolled in a Medicare Advantage plan under Medicare Part C.
hospice eligibility relative to the 6-month prognosis mark can be quite difficult, especially for individuals with noncancer diagnoses [such as Alzheimer’s disease87]. Moreover, limiting hospice to individuals who agree to forego curative therapies creates an artificial distinction between potentially life-prolonging and palliative therapies and could impede both enrollment and quality of care.88 Commentators have suggested modifications to the six-month prognosis certification requirement aimed at increasing hospice enrollment.89

Even when an eligible individual is enrolled in a Medicare-financed hospice program, often the enrollment takes place very late in the dying process and the limited amount of services provided by the hospice agency under the Medicare benefit still leaves the family with a substantial caregiving burden.90 Medicare pays hospices on a per diem basis, and the hospice is expected to provide, within that present maximum daily amount, all nursing, medical, and ancillary services for the hospice-related diagnosis, including medicines, various therapies, social work, and chaplaincy.91

The net effect is that families in need of more help than hospice can provide have to transfer a patient to a skilled

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88. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 463.
90. Id. at 193; Eli L. Diamond et al., Rates and Risks for Late Referral to Hospice in Patients with Primary Malignant Brain Tumors, 18 Neuro-ONCOL. 78, 78–80 (2016); Fairfield et al., supra note 86, at 15.
91. Gillick, supra note 80, at 30.
nursing facility, a hospital, or sometimes a hospice residence. The most common scenario is that family members feel overwhelmed and fear that they do not have the skills to address the loved one’s needs.92

Despite a continual effort to devise effective alternative payment methodologies, most physicians continue to be compensated by the Medicare program on a fee-for-service basis that rewards the volume, not the quality, of services delivered.93 “Generous fee-for-service payments give physicians incentives to—even in the final weeks of life—provide high-intensity, high-cost services, consult multiple subspecialties, order tests and procedures, and hospitalize patients.”94

Exacerbating the suboptimal care situation is the set of incentives that influence nursing homes to transfer acutely ill residents, such as those with fever and chest pain, out of their familiar, comfortable long-term venue to a hospital where death is regarded as failure and a culture of aggressive, curative treatment rather than palliative care is likely to dominate.95 The “when in doubt, ship them out” practice of nursing homes is driven in part by the apprehensions of staff and administrators about potential adverse legal consequences,96 in terms of medical malpractice claims,97 charges of vulnerable adult neglect,98 or regulatory sanctions99 if the individual dies in the

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92. Gillick, supra note 80, at 51; see also Stephanie L. Jarosek, Tetyana P. Shippee & Beth A. Virnig, Place of Death of Individuals with Terminal Cancer: New Insights from Medicare Hospice Place-of-Service Codes, 64 J. AM. GERIATR. SOC’Y 1815, 1815 (2016) (documenting that many hospice patient deaths occur outside of the home).


94. IOM, DYING IN AMERICA, supra note 14, at 276.

95. Gillick, supra note 80, at 52; see also Jessica Mantel, Spending Medicare’s Dollars Wisely: Taking Aim at Hospitals’ Cultures of Overtreatment, 49 U. MICH. J.L. REFORM 121, 121 (2015).

96. Regarding legal apprehensions in nursing homes, see Marshall B. Kapp, Legal Anxieties and End-of-Life Care in Nursing Homes, 19 ISSUES L. & MED. 111, 114 (2003).


nursing home. Nursing homes also are concerned about negative statistics about in-facility resident deaths becoming publicly available and therefore hurting the facility’s marketing efforts in a competitive environment.\footnote{99} Some resident deaths occurring in nursing homes surely are avoidable with better care, but many are inevitable and indeed welcomed by the resident and family.\footnote{101}

Other incentives to hospitalize a resident who appears to be doing precariously medically are more directly financial.\footnote{102} Specifically, most custodial nursing homes are paid for not by Medicare,\footnote{103} but rather by state Medicaid programs, at rates set virtually unilaterally by each state and which inevitably are deemed insufficient by nursing homes and Medicaid-eligible consumers.\footnote{104} Consequently, when a resident becomes acutely ill and needs extensive services, the nursing home has an incentive to cost shift to the hospital, which is paid by Medicare for that person.\footnote{105} Moreover, when a person is transferred, or transferred back, from the hospital to the nursing home for post-acute skilled nursing or skilled therapy care, that patient is not eligible to simultaneously receive hospice benefits,\footnote{106} but the nursing home can then bill Medicare for up to one-hundred days for post-acute services provided to the readmitted resident. The Medicare

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\item See generally Kerry Koehler, \textit{Comparative Shopping in Nursing Homes}, 11 J. HEALTH & BIOMEDICAL L. 439, 448, 466, 470 (2016).
\item David C. Grabowski et al., \textit{Predictors of Nursing Home Hospitalization}, 65 MED. CARE RES. & REV. 30–32 (2008).
\item Gillick, supra note 80, at 52.
\item Id. at 52–53.
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payment for those post-acute services is substantially higher than the rate Medicare was paying for that resident prior to the hospitalization and return to the nursing home.\textsuperscript{107}

Another factor driving nursing home behavior is the bed-hold programs enacted by many states with the intent of providing continuity of care for Medicaid beneficiaries who are temporarily transferred to a hospital for an acute problem.\textsuperscript{108} Reimbursements “made to nursing homes for days that residents are hospitalized may influence facilities’ propensity to hospitalize occupants.”\textsuperscript{109} Further, state Medicaid bed-hold policies also affect the rehospitalization of Medicare post-acute short-stay residents—namely, the more generous the policy, the greater the rate of rehospitalization.\textsuperscript{110}

Despite the perverse Medicare incentives just enumerated, Medicare also creates—and could do even better at creating—potentially positive incentives for better end-of-life care.\textsuperscript{111} For a number of years, patient advocates and commentators have urged that Medicare payments be made available to physicians for conducting conversations with their older patients about advance health care planning.\textsuperscript{112} A 2009 proposal to include such payments in the Affordable Care Act (ACA)\textsuperscript{113} bill, then working its way through Congress, became hopelessly mired in a public “Death Panel” controversy\textsuperscript{114} and several post-ACA legislative proposals to achieve

\textsuperscript{107} Id. at 52.
\textsuperscript{108} Grabowski et al., supra note 102, at 31–32.
\textsuperscript{111} Bill Novelli & Raca Banerjee, Advanced Illness Care: We Can Do Better, 39 GENERATIONS 106, 107–08 (Summer 2015).
\textsuperscript{112} E.g., Sara Keary & Sara M. Moorman, Patient-Physician End-of-Life Discussions in the Routine Care of Medicare Beneficiaries, 27 J. AGING & HEALTH 983, 983–84 (2015).
this end also received inadequate support. Subsequently, the American Medical Association and other lobbyists turned their efforts toward regulatory activity, asking the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to adopt two new billing codes that would pay physicians for time spent discussing advance planning with Medicare patients. In response, CMS proposed two new payment codes in July 2015 allowing for physician reimbursement either “in conjunction with Evaluation and Management services or as an optional component of the annual wellness visit.” Final regulations were published on November 16, 2015.

Currently, Medicare is practically the only third-party payer that compensates physicians for conversing with patients about advance health care planning. Whether this regulatory foray will be broadly embraced by the public and whether it will bear fruit in terms of significantly changing physician and patient behavior in ways that really make a salutary difference in end-of-life care for older persons is an empirical question that will need to be researched. A few private insurance companies have experimented with their own billing codes to cover the cost of end-of-life conversations, but there has been no large-scale indication yet that other private insurers

115. Dolgin, supra note 9, at 279–80.
116. Id. at 280–81.
117. Id. at 281–83.
118. Medicare Program; Revisions to Payment Policies under the Physician Fee Schedule and Other Revisions to Part B for CY 2016, 80 Fed. Reg. 70, 886, 955–60 (Nov. 16, 2015).
120. See Catherine L. Auriemma et al., Public Opinion Regarding Financial Incentives to Engage in Advance Care Planning and Complete Advance Directives, AM. J. HOSPICE & PALLIATIVE MED., June 1, 2016, at 6, http://ajh.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/05/31/1049909116652608.full.pdf+html (finding “less than a quarter of Americans support paying physicians when their patients complete advanced directives, and even fewer support paying physicians to discuss advance care planning with patients”).
or state Medicaid plans will follow this lead and financially facilitate advance health care planning for younger individuals.

5. Ageism Versus Age-Appropriate Considerations in Treatment

In many situations entailing medical decision making, the patient’s age ought to be an important factor taken into account in determining the most appropriate intervention. Age may be relevant to the particular patient’s values and preferences, as well as outcome probabilities, and therefore should properly impact that patient’s informed choices about alternative approaches to medical care.\(^{123}\) For example, one set of investigators lament their finding that advanced age and prognosis do not appear to be associated with the intensiveness of treatment for keratinocyte carcinoma; these authors submit that, although intensive treatment of symptomatic skin cancer may be indicated, older persons with limited life expectancy should be presented with relevant age-related information to ensure that their treatment is consistent with their goals and preferences.\(^{124}\) When the process of physician-patient communication does not adequately include attention to age-related values, preferences, and outcome prognosis, the older patient is at risk of inappropriate treatment,\(^ {125}\) especially when multiple co-morbidities, disability, and frailty are present.\(^ {126}\)

In other situations though, the older patient’s clinical status and prognosis and her personal values and preferences are not de facto determinative of medical decisions for that individual.\(^ {127}\) Instead,

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older individuals may experience care that is compromised in some way mainly as a result of negative professional or societal understanding and attitudes about older people and their social value—the phenomenon of ageism.\textsuperscript{128} Proposals that drew a lot of attention in the recent past calling for an official policy of explicit rationing of limited health resources,\textsuperscript{129} especially in the end-of-life context, exclusively on the basis of the patient’s chronological age largely have been successfully rebutted, even by commentators who acknowledge society’s need to set limits on total health care spending.\textsuperscript{130} Even in the absence of explicit, categorical age-based resource rationing, however, age-related bias on the part of health care professionals and patients’ families can de facto adversely affect the quality of older persons’ end-of-life care,\textsuperscript{131} increasing the likelihood of either under-treatment or over-treatment.\textsuperscript{132}

As noted by one legal advocate for older persons:

Discrimination against older patients in the provision of health care occurs at the bedside through particular decisions made in the care of an individual patient . . . . At the individual level, differential treatment often reflects prejudices and assumptions about older adults, their choices for treatment, and their ability to tolerate and respond to treatment if it is provided.\textsuperscript{133}

For instance, physicians Riou and Boddaert admit:

\begin{itemize}
\item 128. \textit{Id.} at 12–13.
\item 129. \textit{E.g.}, Daniel Callahan, \textit{Must We Ration Health Care For the Elderly?}, 40 J. L., MED. & ETHICS 10 (2012); Norman Daniels, \textit{Just Health Care} (1985) (making a “fair innings” argument); Daniel Callahan, \textit{Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society} (1987).
\end{itemize}
Intensivists actually select patients using chronological age, which is clearly not a surprise. The intensivist is not alone in doing so: anesthesiologists, surgeons, and emergency physicians probably do the same. The intensivist conducts admission triage on a daily basis for other patient categories, including younger patients, based on comorbidities, life-expectancy, and expected benefit of ICU. Thus, the right question is the following: Is the selection of elderly patients appropriate? There are many arguments suggesting that decisions may not be appropriate.134

Taking the patient’s age into proper account in end-of-life treatment decision making—knowing when it is all right and expected for the patient to die, given the medical circumstances—without succumbing to ageism—believing that the patient has consumed a fair share of resources and therefore ought not claim any more—presents a difficult but necessary challenge on the public policy and individual bedside levels.135

CONCLUSION

When older people are involved, the end-of-life medical treatment scenario may take on several legally and socially relevant distinct nuances and characteristics. An increased prevalence of cognitive and affective impairments, different venues of dying and transfers among those venues prior to death, the existence of an aging network, incentives and disincentives emanating from the Medicare program, and the tension between appropriate age-related treatment considerations and ageist discrimination against older patients are the

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key distinctive features of end-of-life decision making identified in this article. In light of these and other special factors pertinent to older persons approaching the last part of life’s journey, flexibility and creativity in the legal and policy approach to end-of-life care in the U.S. will be imperative.