

## **Dialed In: Helping Veterans Take Control of Their Health Care**

### **Setting Health Care Goals When You Have A Serious Illness**

**Narrator:** Hi, and welcome to *Dialed In: Helping Veterans Take Control of Their Health Care*. I'm Beth Doyle, a Veteran of the U.S. Air Force and an education specialist with the VA National Center for Ethics in Health Care. If you have a serious health problem, like cancer, or heart failure, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, you already have a lot to deal with. But if you can, I'd like you to take a step back for a moment and ask yourself two very basic questions. The first question is, "What is important to me?" The second is, "What do I want to accomplish through my health care?" When you're sure you know the answers to these questions, make certain that your health care team and your family also know what your answers are. This will help ensure you receive the care that's right for you. Dr. Jill Lowery is a VA psychologist and an ethics policy consultant with the National Center for Ethics in Health Care.

**Lowery:** Obviously, different people want different things. And what matters to *you*, personally, in your life should guide your medical care. The treatments and services that you get should be built around what's important to *you* – your values – and what you want your health care to accomplish. We call these your goals of care.

**Narrator:** Goals of care are what *you* would like to achieve through your health care. You might want your health care to ease your symptoms so you feel more comfortable. Or, you might want your care to help you be as independent as you can be, or live as long as possible. You might want your health care to help you meet a specific goal – such as attending a wedding or taking a trip.

**Lowery:** When you have serious health problems, there are two groups of people who really need to know what you want to achieve and what you want to avoid with respect to your health: your health care team, first of all, and the person or people you're closest to. Set up a time to talk to your doctor or others on your health care team about what really matters to you as you look ahead, and invite your family or others you trust to come with you. Make sure you bring your health care surrogate – that's the person you want to make health care decisions for you if you ever got too sick to make decisions for yourself.

**Narrator:** Talk to your health care team about what you might expect in the future with your health problems. Knowing how things have gone for other people with similar health problems can help you make decisions for yourself.

**Lowery:** You'll want to talk about your medical condition – what it is and how it might change – and about what's important to you in your life and about your health care. Once they know what you want to achieve – and what you want to avoid – your health care team can help you figure out which services and treatments would or wouldn't match your goals and preferences.

**Narrator:** When your health care team knows what matters most to you, together you can figure out a plan that is most likely to help you get there.

**Lowery:** When you talk with your health care team about treatments, they'll probably bring up the topic of life-sustaining treatments. These are treatments that are provided to try to prolong someone's life when they would be expected to die soon without the treatment. Some examples of life-sustaining treatment include feeding tubes; mechanical ventilation, or breathing machines; dialysis; and cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR. Some people already know they wouldn't want any of these treatments. Others know they would. Some people might want some treatments but not others. It all depends on their goals and what they're willing to accept. Your health care team can tell you how likely it is that those treatments would help you reach your goals, and you can tell them in advance if you already know that you would or wouldn't want them.

**Narrator:** You might have already put your preferences down in an advance directive. If you have, be sure to bring it with you when you talk with your health care team. The advantage of talking about these decisions with your health care providers is that you can find out what the odds are that specific treatments will help you reach your goals, given the health problems that you have.

**Lowery:** It would be hard to know how to honor your wishes if your health suddenly got worse and nobody had asked you anything about it ahead of time. It also really helps family members to know in advance, so someday they don't end up struggling to figure out what to do.

**Narrator:** And talking about it with your family members and surrogate decision-maker means that they will truly understand what it is that you want.

**Lowery:** It's important to know that life-sustaining treatments might or might *not* work to help you live longer – that depends on your medical problems. It's also important to know that life-sustaining treatments won't *cure* disease or chronic illness. Sometimes, they're used for a short time to get a person through a health crisis, such as when a chronic illness suddenly gets worse, or during treatment for a sudden serious illness. They can help some people with certain medical conditions live for a long time. Sometimes, they cause complications or discomfort.

**Narrator:** Your health care team can give you more information about life-sustaining treatments. Talk with them about how these treatments relate to your health care goals.

**Lowery:** The key thing to remember, especially if you have a serious health problem, is that you should talk with people you trust, and with your health care team, about what's important to you, and what you want to accomplish through your health care. Based on your priorities, your health care providers can help you decide which services and treatments would be likely to help you reach your goals – and which ones wouldn't. Your goals and decisions may change over time, and that's okay. Just make sure you let your family and your health care team know if something changes. They're there to make sure you have the information and support you need.

**Narrator:** To learn more about setting health care goals when you have a serious health problem, or to learn more about life-sustaining treatments, visit [www.ethics.va.gov/for\\_veterans.asp](http://www.ethics.va.gov/for_veterans.asp). *Dialed In* is produced by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Ethics in Health Care.