



ISSUE

Respecting Patient Wishes for End-of-Life Treatment

MMA Position

Legislation is needed to authorize a study of creating a statewide registry for Provider Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) forms.

A POLST form establishes a medical order and captures a patient's preferences for key, emergency measures. Its use ensures that a patient's decisions are followed at the end of life. However, if caregivers don't know a patient has a POLST, the patient's wishes cannot be followed.

A statewide registry would enable healthcare providers access to a patient's POLST as care is being provided to ensure a patient's wishes are followed.

Background

The POLST form is a portable medical order that can give patients with an advanced serious illness the option to exercise personal control over the treatment they do and do not want to receive at the end of life. Unlike an advance directive, the POLST form converts a seriously ill individual's preferences for care into medical orders that are immediately actionable as the patient moves across care settings. This is the preferred practice for end-of-life care recommended by the Institute of Medicine.

Immediate access to end-of-life treatment information is especially important during medical emergencies. However, emergency responders often have no access to copies of a patient's POLST form. While the POLST form is meant to travel with the patient between care settings, the paper form can get lost during transfers — or never sent with the patient at all.

One solution to this problem, particularly during an emergency, is the implementation of an electronic registry of patients' POLST forms. A statewide POLST registry would make this information available

to any qualified provider, anywhere, at any time. It would provide a reliable verification system if the paper POLST form or electronic health record were unavailable. With round-the-clock phone and electronic access to POLST information, providers would be able to follow a patient's wishes even at the most stressful moments.

The MMA recommends that the Legislature authorize a feasibility analysis of a statewide POLST registry to ensure all voices are heard, to address implementation issues, and to define the necessary capabilities for a statewide registry of POLST forms.

Talking Points

- The timeliness and specificity of the POLST form make it a powerful tool for ensuring a patient's wishes are known and respected, and for guiding the treatment options initiated by emergency responders, emergency room personnel, intensive care unit staff, and other providers.
- The POLST Minnesota program was established in 2008 by an interdisciplinary steering committee, led by the Minnesota Medical Association. It included physicians, nurses, ethicists, and others.
- A standardized POLST form, developed in 2010, is a valid and valuable tool for effective end-of-life planning. Today, the POLST form is used and recognized by hospital systems, long-term care facilities, medical professionals, and emergency medical services throughout Minnesota.