

# DC | HEALTH

## Death with Dignity

Physician Education Module

# WHAT IS DEATH WITH DIGNITY

- The District of Columbia passed the “Death with Dignity Act of 2016.
- The Act establishes a process by which competent, terminally ill residents of the District of Columbia can legally obtain a physician’s prescription for drugs to end their life in a humane and peaceful manner.
- The District of Columbia Department of Health (DC Health) will regulate and oversee the Death with Dignity process. DC Health’s primary responsibilities include:
  - Providing educational resources on how the Death with Dignity process works;
  - Clarifying the requirements that must be followed by physicians, patients; and pharmacists
- Any physician wishing to participate in this process is required to review this module before any covered medication is prescribed.

# WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- In order to participate in the Death with Dignity program, a patient must:
  - Be eighteen (18) years of age or older;
  - Reside in the District of Columbia;
  - Be under the care of a physician licensed in the District of Columbia; and
  - Have a terminal disease, which is expected to result in death within six (6) months.

# CONFIDENTIALITY

- The identity of physicians, patients, pharmacists, and other healthcare providers participating in the Death with Dignity program are confidential, and will not be made available to the public.
- All forms submitted under the Act are not public records, and cannot be made available to the public, even pursuant to a FOIA request.
- All data collected pursuant to the Death with Dignity Act is for statistical purposes only.

# ESTABLISHING RESIDENCY

- A patient may establish residency by submitting any two (2) of the following original documents that include a valid address in the District of Columbia:

1. A utility bill or computer printout (water, gas, electric, oil or cable), with name and address, issued within the last sixty (60) days (disconnect notices are not acceptable);
2. A telephone bill or computer printout (cell phone, wireless, or pager bills acceptable), reflecting patient's name and current address, issued within the last sixty (60) days (disconnect notices not accepted);
3. A deed, mortgage, or settlement agreement reflecting the patient's name and property address issued;
4. An unexpired lease or rental agreement with the name of the patient listed as the lessee, permitted resident, or renter (may be a photocopy). The unexpired lease or rental agreement shall be signed by all parties;
5. A District property tax bill or tax assessment issued within the last twelve (12) months reflecting the applicant's name and property address;
6. An unexpired homeowner's or renter's insurance policy reflecting the patient's name and address;
7. A letter with picture from the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency or DC Department of Corrections certifying the patient's name and District residency issued within the last sixty (60) days;
8. A Department of Motor Vehicles proof of residency form signed by the certifier residing at the residence and a copy of the certifier's unexpired DC Driver license or DC identification card;
9. A bank, credit union, credit card, or investment account statement issued within the last sixty (60) days reflecting the patient's name and address;
10. A piece of official mail – received from any government agency (with the patient's full name and address) to include contents and envelope received within the last sixty (60) days;
11. A form from a social service provider that includes the patient's name and address issued within the last 60 days;
12. A medical bill issued within the last sixty (60) days reflecting the patient's name and address;
13. A student loan statement issued within the last sixty (60) days reflecting the patient's name and address;
14. A home line of equity statement issued within the last sixty (60) days reflecting the patient's name and address;
15. A car or personal loan statement (no coupon books/vouchers accepted) issued within the last sixty (60) days reflecting the patient's name and address; or
16. A home security system bill issued within the last sixty (60) days reflecting the patient's name and address.

# DOCUMENTING RESIDENCY

- The attending physician shall retain a copy of documents used to establish the patient's residency.
- The documents must be maintained in the patient's record.

# WHO CAN WRITE A PRESCRIPTION?

- The attending physician is responsible for dispensing the covered medication, or submitting a prescription for the covered medication to a pharmacy.
- An attending physician is:
  1. A physician selected by or assigned to the patient;
  2. Has primary responsibility for the treatment and care of the patient; and
  3. Must hold all current licensure and registration in the District of Columbia necessary to prescribe and/or dispense the covered medication.

# OBTAINING THE MEDICATION

- In order to obtain the covered medication from an attending physician, a patient must:
  1. Make two (2) oral requests to the attending physician, separated by a minimum of fifteen (15) calendar days; and
  2. Make a written request before the second oral request, and at least forty eight (48) hours before any medication is dispensed or prescribed.
- Once the written and two (2) oral requests are made, the attending physician can either dispense the covered medication directly to the patient, or submit a prescription for the covered medication directly to the pharmacy, to be picked up by the patient or their designee.



# THE ORAL AND WRITTEN REQUESTS

- The requests must be made voluntarily.
- The patient must be capable of making and communicating their requests to the attending physician.
- The written request must be submitted to the physician on the “Request to End My Life in a Humane and Peaceful Manner” form, located online at <https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/death-dignity-act-2016>.
- The written request must be sent to, and received by, the attending physician between the first and second oral requests.
- There must be two (2) witnesses to the written request.
- The physician is required to upload the form to the Death with Dignity web portal, located online at <https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/death-dignity-act-2016>.
- A patient shall only be enrolled in the Death with Dignity portal after the patient makes the first formal request to participate. Simply having a discussion about utilizing the Death with Dignity program does not constitute an oral request.

# ACCEPTABLE WITNESSES

- The attending physician is **never** an acceptable witness;
- One witness can be anyone the patient chooses, other than the attending physician.
- The other witness can be anyone the patient chooses **who is not**:
  1. A relative of the patient by blood, marriage, or adoption;
  2. A recipient of the patient's estate;
  3. The owner, operator, or employee of the health care facility where the patient is receiving treatment or is a resident;
- If the patient is in a health care facility (e.g., a nursing home, community residence facility or assisted living facility), one witness shall be a person designated by the facility except the owner, operator, or employee of the facility.

# PHYSICIAN REQUIREMENTS

- After the patient has made the required oral and written requests, the attending physician must determine:
  1. The patient has a terminal disease that will result in death within six (6) months;
  2. The patient is capable of making and communicating health care decisions;
  3. The request was made voluntarily; and
  4. The patient is a resident of the District of Columbia.
- The attending physician must provide the patient with information that will allow the patient to make an informed decision. This includes informing the patient of:
  - The medical diagnosis and prognosis;
  - The potential risks and probable results of taking the covered medication; and
  - Feasible alternatives to taking the covered medication (e.g., comfort care, hospice care and pain control)

## PHYSICIAN REQUIREMENTS (CONT.)

- The attending physician must also inform the patient of:
  1. The availability of supportive counseling services;
  2. Recommend the patient notify next of kin, friends, and spiritual advisor, if applicable, of their decision;
  3. The importance of having another person present when taking the medication
  4. The importance of not taking the medication in a public place; and
  5. The opportunity for the patient to cancel the request for covered medication at any time.
- The physician registration form, physician attestation form, and physician compliance form must be submitted via the Death with Dignity web portal at <https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/death-dignity-act-2016>.

# PHYSICIAN REQUIREMENTS (CONT.)

- The Attending Physician must submit the following forms via the Death with Dignity web portal at <https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/death-dignity-act-2016>:
  1. Physician Registration and Attestation to Access Electronic Death with Dignity Notification
  2. Attending Physician's Compliance Form
  3. Consulting Physician's Compliance Form
  4. Psychiatric Physician's Compliance Form
  5. Psychiatric/Psychological Consultant's Compliance Form
  6. Request to End My Life in a Humane and Peaceful Manner

# ROLE OF CONSULTING PHYSICIAN

- Next, the attending physician will refer the patient to a consulting physician.
- A consulting physician is a doctor that is qualified to make a professional diagnosis and prognosis regarding the patient's specific disease, and is willing to participate in the Death with Dignity process.
- The consulting physician's responsibilities include:
  1. Examine the patient and review their medical records to confirm the diagnosis of a terminal disease; and
  2. Submit written verification to the attending physician, that the patient is capable of making and communicating health care decisions, is acting voluntarily, and has made an informed decision.

# REPORTING REQUIREMENT

- The attending physician will notify the DC Health when the covered medication is prescribed via the physician's web portal.
- Once the prescription is dispensed from a District of Columbia registered pharmacy, the pharmacist must **immediately** notify the attending physician and DOH. The notification from the Pharmacist must be on the Pharmacy Dispensing Record, approved by DC Health and submitted to the location identified on the form.
- Within thirty (30) days after the dispensing of a covered medication, the attending physician must submit to the DC Health a copy of the patient information, via the Death with Dignity web portal at <https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/death-dignity-act-2016>.
- Within thirty (30) days after a patient takes a covered medication, or as soon as reasonable after a health care provider is made aware of a patient's death, the health care provider **must** notify DC Health of the patient's death.

# COUNSELING REFERRAL

- If the attending physician or consulting physician believes the patient may have impaired judgment due to a mental health disorder or depression, the attending physician must refer the patient to a psychiatrist or psychologist that is licensed in the District of Columbia for counseling.
- If the patient is referred for counseling, the patient **must** see a psychiatrist or psychologist that is licensed in the District of Columbia, before any covered medication can be prescribed.
- The psychiatrist or psychologist must determine that the patient does not have impaired judgment due to a mental health disorder or depression, and send the consult to the attending physician. The attending physician will submit the Psychiatric/Psychological Consultant's Compliance form via the physician web portal.



# DISPENSING OR PRESCRIBING THE MEDICATION

- Immediately before any covered medication is prescribed or dispensed, the attending physician must offer the patient an opportunity to change his or her mind and ensure the person is making an informed decision.
- The covered medication will either be:
  1. Dispensed to the patient directly from the treating physician; or
  2. The patient's attending physician will submit a prescription for the covered medication directly to a pharmacy.
- A prescription for a covered medication **shall never** be given to the patient to be filled at a pharmacy.

# DISPENSING OR PRESCRIBING THE MEDICATION (CONT.)

- If the attending physician **dispenses** the covered medication, it can be dispensed directly to the patient at the physician's office.
- If the attending physician **prescribes** the covered medication they are responsible for delivering that prescription to a pharmacy located and licensed in District of Columbia either personally, by telephone, facsimile, or electronically. The attending physician **cannot** give the prescription to the patient for them to take to a pharmacy to be filled.
- Once the covered medication is prescribed, it must be picked up at the pharmacy by the patient, the patient's attending physician, or another individual designated by the patient that has been **previously communicated** to the pharmacy, either orally or in writing.

# RESCIND THE REQUEST

- The patient can change their mind regarding the use of covered medication at anytime.
- It is recommended the patient consult with their attending physician prior to making any decisions on whether to rescind the request to participate in the Death with Dignity process.
- If the patient changes their mind and decides to no longer utilize the Death with Dignity process, they will need to inform their attending physician of their decision. This notification helps ensure proper medication reconciliation, that correct information is provided to emergency responders, and ensures accurate statistical data collection.
- If the patient decides in the future to again utilize the Death with Dignity process, they will be required to restart the application process.

## ADDITIONAL HELPFUL INFORMATION

- The applicable standard of care shall not be diminished for the attending physician, consulting physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, or other health care providers participating in the Death with Dignity process.
- No person shall be subject to civil or criminal liability or professional disciplinary action under District of Columbia law, for participating in good faith compliance with the Death with Dignity Act, or refusing to participate in providing the covered medication, or being present when a qualified patient takes the covered medication.
- A health care provider can prohibit its employees from participating in the Death with Dignity Process within the scope of their employment.
- No attending physician can be a witness to the patient's written request for covered medication.

## ADDITIONAL HELPFUL INFORMATION (CONT.)

- A patient can change his or her mind regarding the use of covered medication anytime.
- A request for covered medication **cannot** be used as a basis for the appointment of a guardian or conservator.
- The patient can take the covered medication in his or her home, or any other location he or she has permission to take the medication, **except** in a public location. The patient's estate or family will be responsible to the District of Columbia for any costs associated with taking the medication in a public place.

## ADDITIONAL HELPFUL INFORMATION (CONT.)

- If the patient takes the covered medication, the cause of death listed on the death certificate will identify the underlying medical condition leading to the patient's death, and will not include information about the use of covered medication.
- The Death with Dignity program does not authorize anyone to end a patient's life by lethal injection, mercy killing, active euthanasia, or any other method or medication that is not allowed by the program.
- Actions taken in accordance with the program do not constitute suicide, assisted suicide, mercy killing or homicide.
- The attending physician's practice shall not be primarily or solely composed of patients requesting a covered medication.

## ADDITIONAL HELPFUL INFORMATION (CONT.)

- Pursuant to District of Columbia law, the use of covered medication will not have an effect on life insurance, health insurance, accident insurance, annuity policies, or employment benefits.
- Any person who willfully alters or forges a request for a covered medication or conceals or destroys rescission of a request for a covered medication with the intent or effect of causing the patient's death, is punishable as a Class A felony.
- Any person who willfully coerces or exerts undue influence on the patient to request or ingest a covered medication with the intent or effect of causing the patient's death, is punishable as a Class A felony.

# QUESTIONS?

## DEATH WITH DIGNITY CONTACT INFORMATION

Department of Health  
Death with Dignity  
Health Regulation and Licensing Administration  
899 North Capitol Street, NE  
2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20002

Phone: (202) 724-8800

Email: [deathwithdignitydc@dc.gov](mailto:deathwithdignitydc@dc.gov)

Website: <https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/death-dignity-act-2016>