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Words and experience matter to surrogates making end of life decisions

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This study investigated the relationship between end of life terminologies and decisional conflict in surrogate decision makers using a convenience sample of 234 adults age 50 and older. Participants were randomized into two groups, and each received a vignette that was personalized. The vignettes varied only in the use of the words “Do Not Resuscitate (DNR)” and “Allow Natural Death (AND)”. The Decisional Conflict Scale (DCS) was administered and demographic data were collected. There was no difference in total DCS score based on AND and DNR versions. However, AND respondents perceived their decision as a good decision, and were eight times more likely to sign the document than DNR participants, indicating that framing influences surrogate decision making at the end of life. Experienced decision makers (EDMs) evolved as a discreet group. They had lower mean total DCS scores and lower mean subscores, indicating that prior experience is an important aspect of end of life decision making. Additionally, AND and EDM participants were more likely to perceive their decision as good and were more likely to be to be sure of their decision, indicating that experienced decision makers respond more favorably to the words Allow Natural Death. The term AND lead to increased likelihood of actually making a decision. Respondents to the DNR version were likely to not sign or postpone signing. Finally, participants were more likely to withdraw from the study when the term DNR was used.

Biography

Dawn Fairlie has completed her PhD from the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is an Assistant Professor and an ELNEC Certified Gerontological Nurse Practitioner. She serves on the board of directors for Halos for Angels, a non-profit organization serving cancer patients in her home community. She is also developing a website, I AM PREPARED TM to assist individuals and families with end of life decision making.

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