

Physicians' Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment (POLST) Evaluation Project

Phase I Preliminary Report

Prepared by: Judy Meyers, Crystal Moore, Melissa Ahern, Alice McGrory, and Jennifer Sparr

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The purpose of this exploratory research was to evaluate use of the POLST in 25 nursing homes in the pilot area of Spokane and Whitman Counties. The pilot implementation began on August 1, 2000. These data were collected during January 2001.

Phase I of the evaluation study was a preliminary examination of the following questions:

1. With use of the POLST, are health care providers and nursing home staff complying with policies related to informed consent?
2. What type of training did nursing home staff receive regarding use of the POLST?
3. Is the content of current POLST forms consistent with nursing home residents' current choices about end-of-life care?
4. Does use of the POLST make residents' wishes more portable to ensure that wishes are not lost as residents move from setting to setting?
5. In the pilot area, how widely is POLST being used in nursing homes?
6. Have Emergency Medical Services encountered the POLST in the field?
7. Do health care providers have problems using POLST? If so, what is causing these problems and how can the problems be resolved?

Population and Sample

Of the 25 nursing homes in Spokane and Whitman Counties who participated in training related to use of the POLST, six granted permission for the evaluation study to be conducted at their facilities. These six were Royal Park, Riverview, St. Joseph's Care Center, Beverly—Palouse Hills,

the Waterford, and Cheney Care Center. Contact people included Directors of Nursing, social workers, and administrators. Charts of all nursing home residents who currently have POLST forms in the participating nursing homes were reviewed, and all available residents who have POLSTs, or their legal surrogates, were interviewed.

Of the six participating nursing homes, two (Cheney Care Center and The Waterford) had no POLST forms in use; the remaining four facilities (Royal Park, Riverview, St. Joseph's, and Palouse Hills) were found to have a total of 21 valid POLST forms currently in use. The breakdown of the total number is as follows: Royal Park (n=4); Riverview (n=1); St. Joseph's (n=6); Palouse Hills (n=10).

To assess how often Emergency Medical Services encounter the form in the field, EMS coordinators in Spokane and Whitman counties were asked to track the number of POLSTs encountered in the field during the pilot period.

Setting

The participating nursing homes were the six facilities that granted permission to study use of the POLST in their facilities. Five of the six (Royal Park, Riverview, St. Joseph's, and The Waterford) are located in Spokane County; one (Palouse Hills) is located in Whitman County.

Procedures

Numerous attempts were made to gain permission to conduct the evaluation study in the 25 identified nursing homes. Six letters of permission were signed, granting permission for research to be conducted at that facility. IRB approval was obtained at both Washington State University and Eastern Washington University.

Contact persons at each of the six participating nursing homes were contacted by a research assistant in order to determine the number of current POLSTs being used and to coordinate times for chart review and resident interviews. Contact persons were also told that a research assistant would be contacting them for an interview. One research assistant performed telephone interviews of contact persons from each of the six participating nursing homes. For each interview, the Verbal Consent Script was read, and the Interview with Nursing Home Contact Person was utilized (Appendix A). The interviewer took detailed notes during the interview, transcribed these, and identified major themes.

Chart review was performed in each of the facilities that reported having POLSTs currently in use. Charts of all residents bearing valid POLSTs were reviewed, utilizing the Chart Review Tool (Appendix C). One research assistant conducted all audio taped resident interviews, after determining resident competence for interview, reading consent forms, and obtaining written consent (Appendix B). One resident gave verbal consent due to physical limitations that prevented him from signing. In the event that a legal surrogate had signed the POLST for the resident, an audio taped telephone interview of that legal surrogate was performed. All available residents and legal surrogates were interviewed. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and the interviewer identified major themes.

EMS coordinators were given a questionnaire (Appendix D) to distribute to EMS personnel, that was to be completed when a POLST form was encountered in the field. Personnel were instructed to complete a questionnaire whenever they encountered a POLST form. The completed questionnaire was then to be faxed to the EMS coordinator.

Instrumentation

Data were gathered via interviews and chart review. Open-ended telephone and personal interviews utilized two interview guides. One was for nursing home contact persons, see Appendix A. The other was for nursing home residents, see Appendix B. Interviews with nursing home residents or their legal surrogates were audiotaped. For chart review, the research assistants utilized the Chart Review Tool in Appendix C. The principal researchers developed the Interview Guides used for the nursing home contact persons and the residents/legal surrogates, consent scripts for interviews, consent forms, and the Chart Review Tool.

Interview with Nursing Home Contact Person

Description

The interview with nursing home contact persons was designed to determine what methods of training and education of nursing home personnel had been used, what informed consent processes were specified, what policies and procedures related to POLST use were specified, and problems with using the POLST form. Six open-ended questions were designed to elicit this information.

Validity/Reliability

The contact persons interviewed were individuals who were identified previously by the principal researchers as (1) being familiar with the POLST pilot project and (2) being responsible for tracking POLST use in their respective facilities. All interviews were conducted by telephone by a single research assistant, who took notes during the interviews, and transcribed the audiotapes.

Interview Guide for Nursing Home Residents

Description

The interview with nursing home residents was designed to elicit information regarding the congruency of residents' end of life wishes as stated with their POLST forms, and issues of informed consent. Two open-ended questions were developed for the purpose of gleaning this information.

Validity/Reliability

Audio taped interviews were completed on all residents who were POLST users, were deemed competent, and were able to communicate. Nurses on duty were asked to evaluate residents' cognitive abilities to understand interview questions and to communicate adequately for audiotaping purposes. Only residents whose signature appeared on the POLST were considered for interviews. For those residents who were incompetent, legal surrogates whose signature appeared on the POLST were interviewed by audiotaped telephone interviews. A single research assistant performed all resident and legal surrogate interviews.

Chart Review Tool

Description

The Chart Review Tool was designed to evaluate the following: (1) whether the informed consent process was followed, (2) whether residents' wishes were honored, (3) whether appropriate review had occurred, (4) whether there was evidence of transport across settings, and (5) whether there was congruence with an existing advance directive. A five-question form was developed to elicit this information.

Validity/Reliability

