Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Susan Hickman

RESPECT Center Co-Director Dr. Susan Hickman, PhD is nationally recognized for her work with the POLST (Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment) paradigm, which is a program designed to document a patient's treatment preferences for end-of-life care in the form of written, actionable medical orders. Reviewed and signed by the treating physician, the POLST form travels with the patient to all health care and home settings to help ensure continuity of treatment across care settings. The POLST form augments a current living will, and is specifically intended for seriously ill persons with advanced progressive illness or frailty. The POLST program is an endorsed program in 12 states with developing programs in more than 15 states including Indiana. Since coming to Indiana, Dr. Hickman has co-led the development of the 60-member state-wide Indiana Patient Preferences Coalition of community stakeholders representing law, medicine, nursing, and ethics. The coalition's goal is to develop an Indiana version of the POLST paradigm, known as POST (Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment). She also has been involved in drafting HB1114 and provided POST testimony to the Indiana House Public Health Subcommittee during the 2012 legislative session.

Dr. Hickman's POLST research has shown that it is possible to elicit and communicate patient preferences regarding treatment near end-of-life, but little is known about how patients and their families make decisions to transition from curative to comfort care. Dr. Hickman, along with Paul Helft, MD, Barbara Habermann, PhD, RN, and Michael Weaver, PhD, RN, recently received a two-year grant from the Walther Cancer Foundation to study such decision-making by older adults with incurable cancer and their family members.