Innovative Medical Order Program Ensures Patients' Treatment Wishes Are Honored

Press Release: PORTLAND, Ore. - According to newly published research, a program created to communicate the treatment preferences of those with advanced illness or frailty ensures those preferences are honored 94 percent of the time. The Program, called Physicians Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment (POLST), was launched in Oregon almost 20 years ago. It enables patients to document preferences to have or decline treatments in the form of medical orders. Since that time, the program has expanded to a dozen other states across the nation. The most recent research on the POLST program was funded by the National Institute of Nursing Research and is available online in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

This study was designed to assess whether the treatments provided were consistent with what was documented on the POLST form. A review of medical records and POLST forms for 870 living and deceased patients found that POLST orders about resuscitation were honored 98 percent of the time and orders to limit medical interventions were honored 91 percent of the time.

When patients identify treatments they do not want, the POLST form directs clinicians to use more extensive interventions to enhance comfort if needed. A majority (74%) of the medical interventions provided to patients with POLST orders for comfort care only orders in the study were focused on enhancing comfort, such as sending a patient to the hospital after a fall. Shifting goals of care are reflected by changes in POLST orders. Near the end of life, 24% of POLST orders were re-written to reflect a change of preferences, primarily for more comfort-focused care.

"This latest research builds upon our previous findings that suggest the POLST program offers significant advantages over traditional methods like advance directives and Do Not Resuscitate orders to communicate patients' preferences about life-sustaining treatments," said lead author, Susan Hickman, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Schools of Nursing at Indiana University and Oregon Health & Science University. "Our next steps are to study the process of completing a POLST form to learn how to best support patients and families in making complex decisions about treatment in the face of serious illness."