

# Database to hold health directives

By Tracy Loew

Statesman Journal

November 9, 2009

Oregon's pioneering health-care-directive forms are going electronic.

As part of the state's comprehensive health reform package, Oregon is investing \$740,000 in Oregon Health & Science University's computerized system for accessing patients' wishes about issues such as intensive care, antibiotics and tube feeding.

It will be the nation's first 24-hour electronic registry for the voluntary forms. Oregon pioneered the program about 15 years ago.

"In some situations family members may not know immediately where a (directive) is," said Michael Heffner, emergency medical services coordinator for the Salem Fire Department Ambulance Service.

"We certainly want to make sure we're following their wishes."

People can start turning in forms now to be included in the electronic registry, and the system is supposed to launch around Dec. 1.

The project began in Oregon in 1991, when medical ethics leaders realized that patient wishes for life-sustaining treatments weren't always honored despite the availability of advance directives.

OHSU convened a group to create a form, called POLST, which stands for physician orders for life-sustaining treatment. The form's creation was completed in 1995.

The pink-colored form ensures that medical workers know a patient's wishes about intensive care, antibiotics, tube feeding



**Kobbi R. Blair | Statesman Journal**  
Rebecca Rogers, a support services coordinator for Willamette Valley Hospice, transfers documentation from patient records for the new POLST registry.

## Links

House Bill 2009:

<http://www.leg.state.or.us/09reg/measpdf/hb2100.dir/hb2116.en.pdf>

House Bill 2116:

<http://www.leg.state.or.us/09reg/measpdf/hb2100.dir/hb2116.en.pdf>

POLST information:

[www.polst.org](http://www.polst.org)

## Policy board

The new Oregon Health Policy Board will hold its first meeting from 1 to 5 p.m. Tuesday in Hearing Room E at the State Capitol Building.

Agenda items include a review of the Oregon Health Authority organization and budget,

and more.

The form now is used by all hospices and about 95 percent of nursing homes statewide. It's kept in medical records and given to patients to post in their residences.

Thirty states, including California, Idaho and Washington, since have adopted similar programs.

Still, emergency workers complained that they couldn't always find the forms in time.

"Any tool that's out there that will help us know what patients would like to have happen when they're unable to speak is a welcome tool for our crews," said Aaron Monnig, clinical manager for Rural Metro Ambulance.

If they can't locate a POLST form, emergency responders are obligated to render aggressive assistance, said Dr. Nancy Boutin, medical director of the Salem Cancer Institute.

"Many physicians have had the experience of having a patient who made this decision, and then through whatever lack of communication along the way, they woke up after being resuscitated. It's really sort of heartbreaking," Boutin said. "Nature was trying to take its course, and we intervened against their wishes through someone not knowing."

With the electronic registry, emergency workers will be able to call a hotline at OHSU, ask questions to make sure the person and form are an exact match, and use the information to guide patient care.

"It's going to be extraordinarily helpful to both the EMTs and our patients," said Linda Downey, executive director of Willamette Valley Hospice.

OHSU launched a computerized system in 2005 for its patients, and expanded it to patients in the Portland area in 2007.

In 2008, using a \$95,000 grant from the Greenwall Foundation and private donations, it began a larger pilot program.

The electronic registry was completed in December 2008, and in May 2009 it was rolled out in Clackamas County.

It's already been used by emergency responders there at least three times, said Bruce Goldberg, director of the state Department of Human Services and Oregon Health Authority.

The state's \$740,000 investment is for this biennium only. Costs to maintain the database are expected to be about the same in coming years, according to Jeanene Smith, administrator of the state Office for Oregon Health Policy and Research.

Officials expect about 15,000 new POLST forms will be entered into the database each year,

review of previous plans for health reform, planning for a December retreat and announcement of an outreach coordinator position.

The public is welcome to attend. For more information, call (503) 947-2340.

#### **POLST**

People seeking to obtain a POLST — physician orders for life-sustaining treatment— form must do so through their physician, who also must fill out and sign the form.

The form will remain in the patient's medical file, and the patient will be sent home with a copy to keep on their refrigerator or another prominent place.

Patients also can fax, e-mail or mail a copy to the electronic registry office, at (503) 418-2161, polstreg@ohsu, or 3181 SW Sam Jackson Park Road, CDW-EM, Portland, OR 97239.

No one is required to have a POLST form, and those who do can opt out of the electronic registry.

See this story at [StatesmanJournal.com](http://StatesmanJournal.com) for more information about POLST or to read the state's contract with OHSU.

with a total of 50,000 forms when it is fully operational.

tloew@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6779