

# The Documents You Need, When You Need Them

By Paula Span

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Few things drive an emergency room staff quite as nuts as a patient who has, yes, carefully considered her preferences, designated a health care decision-maker should she become incapacitated, and documented all that information in an advance directive — which is sitting in a locked safe deposit box or stashed in an bureau drawer at home.

But as we've discussed before, that's [hardly an uncommon scenario](#). In fact, the president of the American Bar Association, Jim Silkenat, told me that until recently, his own advance directive wasn't easily accessible.

"It was in a file here in my office" in Midtown Manhattan, he said. "My kids knew about it, but they had no idea where it was. Nobody had really focused on it." Fortunately, since his children live in Scotland and Arizona, Mr. Silkenat hadn't encountered an emergency requiring them to show up at a hospital with the document.

But enough people do find themselves in that quandary that the association's Commission on Law and Aging has developed a smartphone app, [My Health Care Wishes](#), that allows you to store your own advance directive or family members' on your iPhone or Android phone. When you need them, the app lets you present such documents — and other health information and contacts — via email or Bluetooth.



Those digitally transmitted documents have the same legal authority as a signed and witnessed form on paper, said Mr. Silkenat, who now uses the app himself. "We've tested this with health care providers, family members, health insurers," he said. "So far it's worked well."

My Health Care Wishes comes in two versions. The free one lets you store one person's information; the \$3.99 Pro version offers unlimited storage for any number of people, and includes click-to-call and click-to-email features that let you send the information instantly.

As readers have pointed out, you can store advance directives in other digital ways. Several recommended [DocuBank](#), which for \$45 a year makes health care and legal documents available 24/7 with a phone call. [MyDirectives](#) is another free web-based system. About a dozen states — including [Vermont](#), [North Carolina](#) and [Arizona](#) — have established online registries, though not all are very active, and there have been attempts to create national registries. You could store an email-able document on any phone or tablet, sans app, or file one in Dropbox or another cloud-based storage system.

Mr. Silkenat, unsurprisingly, sees advantages to his association's app: "It works on your cellphone. It really is as convenient as we can possibly make it. And it's free."

But he cares less about whether you use My Health Care Wishes or some other method than about having your advance directive handy. Only a minority of Americans have created such documents, but even when they do, "they aren't as useful as intended unless you've taken the next step and made it available to people at the time the problem comes up."