

## Dialed In: Helping Veterans Take Control of Their Health Care

### Informed Consent Empowers Veterans

**Narrator:** Hi, and welcome to *Dialed In: Helping Veterans Take Control of Their Health Care*. I'm Beth Doyle, a Veteran of the U.S. Air Force and an education specialist with the VA National Center for Ethics in Health Care. As a VA patient, you have a say in the health care you receive. One of the ways that VA supports you in making health care decisions is through a process called *informed consent*. Your health care providers will help you understand your medical condition, and then suggest a treatment or procedure. When they do that, they'll make sure that you're *informed* – that you have the information you need to help you make the best decision for *you*. Ray Frazier, executive assistant of the VA National Center for Ethics in Health Care, explains why.

**Frazier:** Your health care providers want to be confident that you understand what they're recommending, and that you've had the chance to ask questions about your condition and the risks and benefits of the recommended treatment, as well as alternatives.

**Narrator:** When you agree to a treatment or procedure, sometimes you'll *tell* your doctor that you agree to it. At other times, you'll be asked to sign a form. Either way, it's the informed consent *discussion* between you and your health care provider that will help you make good decisions about your care. Dr. David Alfandre, a VA physician and ethics consultant at the National Center for Ethics in Health Care, has some advice on how to participate in that discussion.

**Alfandre:** Start by telling your health care provider what's important to you. You can say, you know what I'm really concerned about? I'm concerned about the number of times a day I have to take this medicine, or the side effect associated with this medicine. Or, I'm worried about the recuperation you say I'm going to need for this operation. That starts a conversation where the doctor can start to respond to your concerns, answer your questions, and find out really what's important to you, so that you can get the care you need. Because oftentimes there are alternatives. And those treatment alternatives may actually be better at meeting your needs.

**Narrator:** Even though your health care providers are experts, they'll *only* know what's best for you if they understand *your* particular needs and concerns.

**Alfandre:** Health care providers certainly are experts, and they have a great deal of expertise in the treatments and procedures that they may be recommending to you. But you are an expert in *you*. So you need to be part of the conversation, so that you can tell your doctor, Yeah, that sounds right for me, or, That sounds like something that I want for my life. Remember, every patient is different, and some things are more important to some patients than others. So when your doctor knows that, they can tailor a treatment plan that fits specifically to you.

**Narrator:** Whatever the treatment or procedure, your health care providers will describe it, tell you about its risks and benefits, and discuss alternatives. Sometimes they'll also give you diagrams, pictures, or educational documents. If you want to know more, feel free to ask questions like, "What happens if I don't do anything – if I don't take this medication or have this procedure?" "How should I weigh the alternatives?" And, "Can I have some time to think about it, and talk it over with my family?" Your health care provider will welcome your questions.

**Alfandre:** Asking a lot of questions means you're interested, you're engaged, and you want to understand everything about the treatment or procedure before it happens. There's nothing disrespectful or problematic about asking questions of your health care provider. It's part of the process, it's something they expect, and it's something that will be helpful for your care.

**Narrator:** Talking with your health care provider can be stressful. Ray Frazier has some suggestions for making sure that you get all your questions answered.

**Frazier:** If you're anything like me, you've probably had the experience of leaving the doctor's office and realizing that you forgot to ask a question that had been on your mind. It's a good idea to bring someone with you during your appointment – someone you trust who will ask questions and also help you remember the answers. You might also find it useful to write down questions you have before your appointment, and bring that list with you. So the end of the discussion, you can scan down the list to make sure your health care provider covered all the bases.

**Narrator:** Remember that if you feel rushed, or if you haven't had enough time to think about what's going on, it's okay to ask more questions. It's also okay to decline a treatment that you feel isn't right for you.

**Alfandre:** If ever you don't understand an aspect of your care, it is OK to slow things down, to ask your health care provider some more questions, and say, "Hang on, I don't understand what you're recommending." Remember, this care is about *you*. And if you don't understand what's going on, or why you're having a procedure or treatment, then it's OK to say, "Stop."

**Narrator:** Informed consent is one of the ways that we put Veterans first. To learn more about informed consent and your rights as a VA patient, visit [www.ethics.va.gov/for\\_veterans.asp](http://www.ethics.va.gov/for_veterans.asp). There, you'll find the information sheet titled, *What You Need to Know About Informed Consent. Dialed In* is produced by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Ethics in Health Care.