



**OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC  
GUARDIAN AND TRUSTEE**

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***MAKING SUBSTITUTE  
HEALTH CARE  
DECISIONS***

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**The Role of the Public Guardian and  
Trustee**

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PUBLIC GUARDIAN AND TRUSTEE

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DECISIONS**

*QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS*

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**1. What is the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee's (OPGT) role in making health care decisions?**

Under Ontario law, no one may be given medical treatment or be moved to a regulated long-term care facility without consent, unless it is an emergency. Capable people make their own decisions, but if a person is not capable, a health practitioner or Community Care Access Centre must turn to a substitute—usually a relative—for a decision. A person who has been appointed the guardian or attorney for personal care has first priority.

If there is no such appointment, which is usually the case, then the health practitioner determines if there are relatives that are willing, capable or available to make the decision. People who are not relatives, such as close friends, may apply to the Consent and Capacity Board, an independent body, to be appointed for this purpose. If none of the above alternatives apply, then the OPGT must

make the decision on the incapable person's behalf. The office's Treatment Decisions Unit handles this work.

**2. What is the purpose of the OPGT's role in making substitute health care decisions?**

The OPGT's role is to serve people who are incapable of making their own decisions about treatment and admission to long-term care. The OPGT provides these people the benefit of informed decision-making about these matters if there is no one else who is available to do this for them.

**3. Does the law require the OPGT to provide this service?**

Yes. The *Health Care Consent Act*, which is administered by the Ministry of Health:

- requires consent for treatment or admission to long-term care, except in an emergency
- says who can give or refuse consent if the person is incapable
- sets out the rules for making these decisions for an incapable person
- requires the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee to make these decisions as a last resort when there is no alternative.

#### **4. What is “treatment”?**

Most things that are done for a “health-related purpose” are included in the definition of “treatment” in the *Health Care Consent Act*. If something is a “treatment” it means that the rules in the *Health Care Consent Act* apply, including the rule that consent is required from the patient or by someone else on his or her behalf. Some of the things that are not included in the definition are:

- assessment of a person’s capacity
- examination to determine a person’s general condition
- personal assistance services such as feeding or bathing
- treatments that, in the opinion of the health care practitioner, pose little or no risk to the person

#### **5. What are “long-term care facilities”?**

Long-term care facilities are commonly referred to as “nursing homes” or “homes for the aged”. These facilities are regulated by the government. All applications and admissions to these facilities are handled through agencies called Community Care Access Centres (“CCAC”).

**6. When is a person considered to be “mentally incapable” of making decisions about Treatment and admission to long-term care?**

A person is incapable of making a decision about treatment or admission to a long-term care facility if he or she cannot understand the relevant information or appreciate what could happen as a result of making, or not making, the decision.

**7. Are children under a certain age automatically considered incapable?**

No. There is no specific “age of consent”. Minors of the same age can have very different levels of mental capacity. Health practitioners therefore assess each situation on an individual basis.

**8. Who decides whether a person is mentally incapable?**

The health practitioner who is proposing the treatment makes this determination. The law says that people are presumed to be capable of making health care decisions. A health practitioner may rely on that presumption unless it is not reasonable to do so in the circumstances.

In the case of admission to long-term care, an “evaluator” makes this determination. Many health professionals (e.g. doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, psychologists and social workers) are authorized to act as evaluators.

[Note: an “evaluator” is not the same thing as a “capacity assessor”. A capacity assessor is a health professional who has been trained and certified to assess *other* types of capacity, such as capacity to manage property. These subjects are covered in the *Substitute Decisions Act*.]

**9. Can a person challenge the finding of incapacity?**

Yes. He or she can apply to an independent body called the Consent and Capacity Board for a hearing to review this finding. Information about the Consent and Capacity Board and how to apply is available at [www.ccboard.on.ca](http://www.ccboard.on.ca) or by calling the Ministry of Health Info-Line at 1-800-461-2036.

**10. How does the person know about this right?**

The law requires that the person be informed of the right to apply for a review of the finding of incapacity. Health practitioners and the CCAC must make sure this happens.

**11. If a person cannot make a decision about one type of treatment does that mean the person can't make a decision about any other type of treatment that may be proposed?**

No. A person may be capable of making a decision about one treatment but not another. A person may be capable of making a decision about a treatment at one time but be incapable of

making the same decision at a different time. It all depends on the complexity of the particular treatment and the person's level of capacity at the time.

**12. Who is authorized to make decisions when a person is mentally incapable?**

Substitute decision-makers are ranked in a hierarchy. The health practitioner—or the CCAC staff, in the case of admission to long-term care—goes down the list until a substitute who is available, capable and willing to make the incapable person's decision is found. The order is:

1. A guardian appointed by the court if the court order authorizes the guardian to make health care decisions
2. A person with a “power of attorney for personal care” authorizing him or her to make health care decisions
3. A representative appointed by the Consent and Capacity Board (any person may apply to the board to be appointed as the substitute decision maker)
4. A spouse or partner
5. A child or parent (custodial parent if the patient is a minor)

6. A parent who has access rights (if the patient is a minor)
7. A brother or sister
8. Any other relative
9. The OPGT.

**13. Who is responsible for locating the right substitute decision-maker?**

The health practitioner who is proposing the treatment or the CCAC handling the admission to a long-term care facility is responsible.

**14. What happens if there is more than one equally ranked person authorized to make a substitute decision and they cannot agree?**

There are two options in this situation. One of the equally ranked decision makers, or another person, may apply to the Consent and Capacity Board to be given the right to make decisions. Alternatively, the OPGT will make the decision if all other efforts to resolve the conflict fail.

**15. What happens in an emergency?**

Treatment may be given without consent in an emergency, unless the practitioner is aware of instructions to the contrary that the patient gave while capable or if there is a substitute present at the time.

An emergency is defined as a situation in which the person for whom treatment is proposed is apparently experiencing severe suffering or is at risk, if the treatment is not administered promptly, of sustaining serious bodily harm.

Similar provisions enable the Community Care Access Centre to admit a person to a long-term care facility without consent in a crisis.

**16. What if a person regains his or her capacity during a course of treatment?**

If this happens, the person then has the right to choose whether to continue the treatment or withdraw consent.

**17. What principles does the OPGT follow in making a treatment or long-term care admission decision?**

The OPGT abides by the rules governing all substitutes that are set out in the *Health Care Consent Act*.

If the person has, while capable, expressed wishes about the matter then the OPGT must follow these wishes. These may have been expressed orally or in writing. The terms “advance directive” or “living will” are often used to refer to the wishes a person expresses while capable.

If there do not appear to be any such wishes, the decision is made in the person’s best interests. In

determining what is in the person's best interests, the OPGT – like all substitutes – must take into consideration:

- the values and beliefs the person held while capable
- the person's current wishes, if these can be ascertained
- the potential benefits of the treatment or admission
- whether the benefits outweigh the risks
- whether there is a less restrictive or less intrusive solution

**18. Are there any circumstances in which a person's "capable wishes" would not be followed?**

If it would be impossible, in the circumstances, to follow a person's prior capable wishes, then the substitute is not bound by them. In any other situation, the Consent and Capacity Board's permission must be obtained before a substitute decision maker can depart from such wishes. No one is allowed to "change" a person's prior capable wishes or make them on the person's behalf. A substitute decision maker cannot, for example, make a "living will" or "advance directive" on behalf of an incapable person.

**19. Will the OPGT make a substitute decision in advance of a health problem arising for an incapable person?**

No. The law does not allow a substitute to make an “advance directive” on an incapable person’s behalf. A substitute can only make a treatment decision after a specific health problem has arisen and a particular treatment has been proposed.

However, decisions may be made about a “plan of treatment”. This means that if a health practitioner is proposing a specific treatment and anticipates, based on the person’s current health condition and the nature of the proposed treatment, that other health problems are likely to arise, the OPGT may make a decision about these other issues in advance as part of the overall plan of treatment.

**20. What information is the OPGT entitled to obtain before making a decision?**

The OPGT – like all substitutes – is entitled to obtain all the information needed to comply with its’ legal duty to make an informed decision. This includes information about the:

- nature of the treatment
- expected benefits of the treatment
- medical risks of the treatment

- medical side effects of the treatment
- alternative courses of action
- likely consequences of not having the treatment

**21. What is the process for obtaining a decision from the OPGT?**

When a health practitioner calls the OPGT's Treatment Decisions Unit, staff will ask for confirmation that the patient is incapable with respect to the treatment and that there are no other substitute decision makers available to make the decision. Once this issue is settled, staff will ask for detailed information about the proposed treatment — so that an informed decision can be made on the incapable person's behalf. Staff will need to speak directly to the health practitioner who is proposing the treatment if other members of the health team, such as the nurses, cannot provide sufficient information. In many cases OPGT staff will visit the patient. Treatment staff also collect information about the incapable person's values and beliefs, if available.

Once OPGT staff believe they have enough information to make an informed decision, the health practitioner, or another member of the patient's health care team will be verbally advised of the decision. This will be followed by a letter.

**22. What is the process for obtaining a decision about admission to long-term care from the OPGT?**

Decisions regarding admission to a long-term care facility are made almost the same way as treatment decisions. CCAC staff usually communicate with the OPGT by telephone or by fax. They are asked to confirm that the person has been found incapable of making the decision about admission and that there is no higher ranked substitute available. They will be asked to explain why admission to long-term care is being proposed and for details about the alternatives that have been considered. Relevant personal information such as marital status, religion, language and cultural preferences will be requested so that the OPGT can make a decision that is sensitive to the needs of the particular individual. OPGT staff will visit the person for whom admission is proposed.

**23. How does the health practitioner contact the OPGT?**

The health practitioner calls the Treatment Decisions Unit in his/her area of the province. Treatment Decisions Consultants (TDC) work in each of the OPGT's regional offices, including London, Hamilton, Toronto and Ottawa. Northern Ontario is serviced through the Ottawa office.

**Greater Toronto Area Call:**

(416) 314-2788

Toll-free 1-800-387-2127

Fax: (416) 314-2637

**Hamilton Region**

Call: (905) 546-8300

Toll-free 1-800-891-0502

Fax: (905) 546-8301

**Ottawa Region  
and Northern Ontario**

Call: (613) 241-1202

Toll-free 1-800-891-0506

Fax: (613) 241-1567

**London Region**

Call: (519) 660-3140

Toll-free 1-800-891-0504

Fax: (519) 660-3148

**24. How long does it take for the OPGT to make a decision?**

This depends on the nature and complexity of the proposed treatment and the speed with which the practitioner is able to provide all the information needed.

These are critically important decisions. The OPGT takes its responsibility to the incapable person very seriously.

Some decisions can be made within a few hours.

Others may, of necessity, take a number of days.

**25. What hours does the program operate?**

The program operates from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm seven days a week.

**26. How can I get more information?**

You can access the OPGT's website at:

[www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/family/pgt/](http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/family/pgt/)

To access general information on mental health and to a publication entitled Rights and Responsibilities – Mental Health and the Law, you can link to the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care website at:

[www.gov.on.ca/health/english/pub/pub\\_links/pub\\_mental.html](http://www.gov.on.ca/health/english/pub/pub_links/pub_mental.html)

A copy of the *Health Care Consent Act* can be obtained from Publications Ontario on-line at [www.gov.on.ca/MBS/english/publications/index.html](http://www.gov.on.ca/MBS/english/publications/index.html) or by mail or phone at:

Publications Ontario  
50 Grosvenor Street  
Toronto, ON  
M7A 1N8  
1-800-668-9938 Toll Free in Ontario or  
(416) 326-5300

To request an information session from OPGT staff contact the Treatment Decisions Unit of the OPGT office closest to you. Telephone numbers are listed on page 13.

The OPGT cannot give individuals, professionals, facilities or organizations legal advice about specific cases or their own legal obligations. These questions should be directed to a lawyer. The Law Society of Upper Canada operates a Legal Referral Service and can be reached by calling 1-900-565-4577. Telephoning this number generates a \$6.00 charge on your phone bill in the month following your call. Lawyers participating in the Service will offer you up to a half-hour free consultation that may be over the phone or in person.

This brochure provides a very general overview of the mandate and operation of the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee in relation to substitute decision making for health care. It does not include all of the details of the law, policies, procedures or exceptions that may apply in a particular case. For information about the law please refer to the applicable statutes and contact your lawyer.