

LONG TERM CARE COMMUNITY COALITION

Advancing Quality, Dignity & Justice

THE ROLE OF MEDICAL DIRECTORS IN NURSING HOMES

FACT SHEET

Federal rules require that every nursing home has a medical director. Under the rules, they play a critical role in the care of residents in nursing homes.

Unfortunately, low medical director staffing is the norm in U.S. nursing homes. As a result, the care of residents in too many U.S. nursing homes lacks the professional oversight and input that only a trained and licensed physician can provide.

This fact sheet provides user-friendly information on the role of the medical director, why their presence in the facility is important to resident care and safety, and advocacy tips for residents, families, and those who work with them.

Note: Information below is directly quoted or paraphrased from the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR),¹ federal guidance, or other resources (see footnotes). Federal standards are applicable to all residents in licensed U.S. nursing homes, including short-term, long-term, private pay, Medicaid, Medicare, or privately insured.

Medical Director [42 C.F.R. § 483.70(h); F841]

“Medical director”² means a physician who oversees the medical care and other designated care and services in a health care organization or facility. Under these regulations, the medical director is responsible for coordinating medical care and helping to implement and evaluate resident care policies that reflect current professional standards of practice.

1. The facility must designate a physician to serve as medical director.
2. The medical director is responsible for –
 - i. Implementation of resident care policies; and
 - ii. The coordination of medical care in the facility.

The facility must identify how the medical director will fulfill their responsibilities to effectively implement resident care policies and coordinate medical care for residents in the facility. Furthermore, the facility must ensure all responsibilities are effectively performed to ensure residents attain or maintain their highest practicable physical, mental, and psychosocial well-being.

¹ <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-42/chapter-IV/subchapter-G/part-483/subpart-B/section-483.24>.

² See CMS State Operations Manual, Appendix PP – Guidance to Surveyors for Long Term Care Facilities. Available at https://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/Guidance/Manuals/downloads/som107ap_pp_guidelines_ltc.pdf.

Medical director responsibilities must include their participation in:

- Administrative decisions including recommending, developing, and approving facility policies related to resident care;
- Issues related to the coordination of medical care identified through the facility's quality assessment³ and assurance committee;
- Organizing and coordinating physician services and services provided by other professionals as they relate to resident care;
- Participate in the Quality Assessment and Assurance (QAA) committee or assign a designee to represent them.

Medical Director vs. Attending Physician

While many medical directors also serve as attending physicians, the roles and functions of a medical director are separate from those of an attending physician. The medical director's role involves the coordination of facility-wide medical care while the attending physician's role involves primary responsibility for the medical care of individual residents.

It is important for residents and families to know that they have a right to choose their own attending physician. For more information, see LTCCC's fact sheet, [Requirements for Nursing Home Physician, Rehab, & Dental Services](#).

Resident-Centered Advocacy Tips

- Though too often overlooked by residents and those who work with them, it's important to remember that, **when it comes to the clinical care in a nursing home, the buck stops with the medical director.**
- Use information on your facility's medical director presence to support your advocacy. **Visit www.nursinghome411.org for the latest staffing data. Our [Nursing Home Staffing Data](#) page includes information on nurse staffing and non-nurse staffing, including medical directors.**
 - Find out the medical director staffing levels for your facility.
 - Choose a facility with a meaningful medical director presence.
 - If there is little or no medical director time in the facility, ask how the important responsibilities outlined in this fact sheet are being performed. **Who's overseeing care if there's no one there?**
- Find out who your facility's medical director is. While it would not be productive to bring every problem to the medical director's attention, persistent, widespread, and/or endangering residents speak directly to the medical director's duties.
- Concerns about problems related to the medical director's duties can also be raised via the facility grievance process, with the LTC Ombudsman Program, and by filing a complaint with the state Medicaid Fraud Control Unit or health department. Use the information in this fact sheet to precisely support your complaint. [See LTCCC's [Abuse, Neglect, & Crime Reporting Center](#) for contact information state and federal agencies.]
- Resident and family councils can be particularly powerful in advocating on fulfillment of medical director responsibilities, since they speak as a group and can present share concerns with relative anonymity.

³ See LTCCC's Fact Sheet: Tips for Providing Input on Your Nursing Home's Staffing Assessment. Available at <https://nursinghome411.org/input-tips-facility-assessment/>.