

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

Six Ways to Make Sure You Get the Geriatric Care You Need

I've recently devoted a lot of time thinking about the issue of Geriatric Care and the very important professionals who provide care to geriatrics: Geriatric Care Managers. A lot of my work involves communicating between members of my staff and those for whom they provide care, so I've had the opportunity to coordinate with numerous GCMs.

Legally, anyone can be a GCM. That's a pretty scary fact, considering the demand for geriatric care: Over the next 30 years, the country's over-65 population will more than double to about 70 million, and the over-85 group will swell from 4 million to 9 million. That means, of course, that services to older Americans will be in great demand. Hence a focus on the growth industry known as geriatric care management—and the importance of carefully selecting a qualified GCM.

The need for leaders in geriatric care is pressing, as older adults utilize 50 percent of hospital care, more than 80 percent of home care services and occupy 90 percent of nursing home beds in the United States, according to 2004 National Center for Health Statistics. As aging baby boomers place greater demands on health care providers, these numbers will no doubt increase.

So who are these people, these GCMs, who will more than likely in the future care for you or someone you love? Ideally, a GCM should hold an advanced degree in gerontology, social work, psychology, nursing, or a related health and human services field.

In my opinion, it is imperative that all GCM's be licensed in their state. Alternatively called case managers, elder care managers, service coordinators or care coordinators, GCMs are individuals who evaluate your situation, identify solutions, and work with you to design a plan for maximizing your elder's independence and well-being.

Geriatric care management usually involves an in-depth assessment, developing a care plan, arranging for services, and following up or monitoring care. While you don't have to implement any part of the suggested care plan, geriatric care managers (due to their experience and familiarity with community resources) often suggest potential alternatives you may not have considered. They can also make sure your loved one receives the best possible care and any benefits to which they are entitled.

With that goal in mind, here are six ways you can help your GCM assemble a plan that works for you, your family and your loved one:

- 1) **Gather Information:** Obtain reliable information from the health care provider who deals with your loved one's condition and the National Institutes of Health. If you use the Internet to gather information, stick with well known medical sites. Understanding what is happening to your care recipient will provide you with the core knowledge you need to plan accordingly. It will also make you a better advocate when you talk with healthcare professionals.
- 2) **Obtain a Geriatric Assessment:** A geriatric assessment is a comprehensive evaluation designed to optimize an older person's ability to enjoy good health, improve their overall quality of life, reduce the need for hospitalization and/or institutionalization, and help them to live independently for as long as possible.
- 3) **Hold a Family Conference.** At least everyone in your immediate family should be informed about the results of the geriatric assessment. A family meeting can establish a foundation for

sharing responsibilities to minimize misunderstandings in the future—when lots of help may be required.

Ask a member of the clergy, a professional care coordinator, or even a trusted friend to serve as an impartial moderator. A family meeting is a good way to let everyone know they can play a role, even if they don't live nearby. It can help you, the primary family caregiver, from bearing the brunt of all the work all of the time.

4) **Check Your Sleep:** The prevalence of sleep-related problems increases with age. "Sleep disorders are common in older adults and often, inappropriately, seen as a consequence of the aging process itself," says Dr. Harrison Bloom, Senior Associate at the International Longevity Center.

While physicians have made significant progress in understanding sleep-related problems such as insomnia, sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome, they remain under diagnosed and under treated in older adults.

5) **Keep Good Records:** Make sure everyone in your family has information regarding doctors, daily medications, special diets, back-up people, and other critical details relating to your loved one's care. Keep this information current.

These records are essential if something happens to you or if you need to make a trip to the ER. Maintaining a computer-based record will make keeping that information current much easier; it may even allow you to provide the medical team with direct access to the information.

6) **Plan Ahead:** Plan ahead for the difficult decisions that are in your future. It's never too early to discuss wills, advance directives, and powers of attorney, but there comes a time when it is too late. Remember, be proactive; not reactive.

For more information and to locate a local GCM, I recommend you visit www.caremanager.org. Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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