

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

Five Steps to Help You Choose the Right Home Health Care Provider

Last month, you learned why it's vital that you have in your life qualified, attentive, knowledgeable and experienced health care providers, before you confront a health care crisis. This month, you'll discover five critical steps that will help you choose the right home health care provider. When you finish reading this column, you'll understand how a little proactive home health care planning can help you ensure your peace of mind.

But first, I'd like to share with you an inspiring story to illustrate why choosing the right home health care provider is so important.

Bill and Barbara are a couple with whom I recently met. Now in their 80s, Bill and Barbara have been married for 65 years. Like you and I, as Bill and Barbara have aged, they have also been forced to confront some uncomfortable realities: Foremost among these are their respective medical issues.

Rather than avoiding these issues, Bill and Barbara took them on. They decided they wanted to stay in their house in Auburn, where they've lived since the day they were married. But they acknowledged that they couldn't keep the house up to Barbara's high standards: Dirt burrowed into hard-to-reach places, the windows were smudged; it was affecting their quality of life. And with their limited mobility, the house was growing increasingly hard to navigate.

Bill and Barbara felt like they had no options; that they'd have to move out of their beloved home. When they expressed this sentiment to me, I said, "You deserve to stay in your home. It's your home."

Together, Bill, Barbara, and I set about developing a plan to make their house safe and secure. The first question we addressed was the most critical and often the most overlooked: How do we keep elderly, at-risk couples like Bill and Barbara safe and secure in their homes?

You see, many of you reading this column might think that it's normal for your caregiver to just come into your house, perform a task or render a service, and leave. Not so. You deserve better. You deserve more. Not just because you're paying for it, but more importantly because you're the ones being served.

The five steps you're about to read will prove to you that effective, caring and quality home health care is much, much more. It's a two-way street marked by constant care and communication.

- 1) *Build a Trusting Relationship:* You and I understand that relationships are the cornerstone of human interaction. Trust isn't bought; it's earned. During my first meeting with Bill and Barbara, I listened to the concerns expressed by their primary care giver. I heard their concerns and answered their questions. If you feel your concerns aren't being heard and your questions are going unanswered, speak up... Or look elsewhere.
- 2) *Take a Holistic Approach:* A concerned caregiver will analyze your entire case, not just your physical issues—or your insurance coverage. To be truly effective, your care plan must take into consideration your physical, social, environmental, psychosocial, and financial resources.
- 3) *Develop a Customized Care Plan:* Once we began applying a holistic approach to Bill and Barbara's case, we really understood their specific needs. We then developed for them a customized care plan, with their input and the input of their primary caregiver that described exactly what the assigned caregiver would do in their home.
- 4) *Match the Caregiver:* Having a customized plan isn't enough, though. You must have the right caregiver to implement the plan. Skill level, personality, schedule—you should carefully consider all of these characteristics before agreeing on the caregiver who will work with you.
- 5) *Make Sure the Plan Is Working:* This involves constant communication and scheduled and unscheduled on-site visits by supervisors. If your current caregiver isn't talking with you at least bi-weekly, that's a red flag. In Bill and Barbara's case, our caregiver is our eyes and ears; he or she tells me what's going on at least weekly—generally more often. Of course, my relationship with Bill and Barbara is maturing to the point where they're comfortable enough to call me if they need something—and as their home health care provider, we do our utmost to respond to their specific needs.

Just because physical limitations prevented Barbara from maintaining the house the way she had for some 60 years doesn't mean they had to move. It simply meant that her caregiver had to find a way to work within their desire to remain in their house. One solution? Their caregiver hired a cleaning service to clean the house and do the windows. In many ways, the view for Bill and Barbara looks better, and they're happier.

There's an obvious lesson here: Don't wait until a crisis situation to choose your home health provider. Be proactive. Be honest with what you can and cannot do. Explain your needs in detail to every home health care provider you consider. Prepare a list of tough questions and don't be afraid to ask them. Since you've overcome the fear of asking for help, it'll be a snap for you to overcome your fear of asking the tough questions.

As we just celebrated Veteran's Day, I'll close with a quote with which most of you vets are probably familiar: "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." Get the resources you need before you absolutely need them.

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. Please contact me at kharm@harmonhomecare.com or 508-791-5600 if there are any specific health issues about which you're curious or concerned.

In December we'll discuss a home safety checklist, including the 10 steps you can take to create a safe environment for your long-term stay in your own home. In the interim, I wish you and yours a healthy, happy, and safe Thanksgiving.

Kimberly Harmon is the Founder & CEO for Harmon Home Health, Inc.

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