

## **Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home**

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

### **The Evening News: A Lesson in Home Health Care**

Last month we talked about complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) and you met my good friend and colleague, Harmon Home Health's Medical Director, Dr. Robert Hansen. I know I promised you that this month's column would introduce you, the readers, to the Role of the Geriatric Care Manager, and I am not in the business of breaking promises.

But there's some very important news you absolutely need to know, and it can't wait.

Like many of you, I watch the local nightly news at 11. I generally stay up pretty late, reviewing case files and preparing for next day's meetings—plus there are the kids' lunches to put together and household chores—always household chores!

Anyway, you probably saw the same story I did: The one in which a local senior was “verbally abused” by a homemaker. At least, that's what the news called it—verbal abuse. I call it criminal. Of course it's shocking and angering to think that the people whom we invite into our lives—into our houses—the people whom we trust with our loved ones—could so vulgarly abuse our trust.

The sordid story infuriated me. In fact, I'm still mad. That these unlicensed, unqualified providers can get into homes like yours motivates me to make sure you don't suffer a similar fate. So in addition to re-screening Harmon Home Health's bonded, licensed, and insured care providers, I also communicated with some experts from the Home Care Alliance of Massachusetts (the Alliance)—an organization in which Harmon Home Health is a proud member.

Patricia M. Kelleher, Executive Director of the Alliance, said that on average, 30,000 home care visits are made each day in Massachusetts. Last year, the Alliance's 120 member agencies provided care to more than 120,000 elderly and homebound citizens in the Commonwealth, so they know what they're talking about. Ms. Kelleher says that while fraud or abuse can occur in any health care setting, it is rare in home care. When it happens, you need to deal with it professionally and appropriately.

“Everything we do is about making sure that seniors feel safe in their home and that their loved ones trust the caregivers we employ,” Kelleher said.

I've said it before and I will say it again: Home health care is a cost effective way to provide high level medical care. With the shortening of the average hospital stay, discharged patients need more support services once they return home – services provided in an effective and cost efficient manner by qualified and licensed home health staff.

The key words in that sentence are “qualified” and “licensed.” Like the Alliance, I believe it is critically important that elders and their families understand that **YOU HAVE A CHOICE** when it comes to who cares for you in your home. You need to feel comfortable asking tough questions of a home care provider directly, including:

- The role of supervisors in the home care process
- The availability of 24 hour care
- Protocols regarding physician and family communications and complaint investigation
- Physician oversight of clinical issues
- Physician and community references

This issue is so important to you that the editor of the *Auburn News* and *Webster Times* has agreed to run a special series on this subject starting in March. (Thank you Blaine!) Over three weeks, you'll discover how to understand and recognize the difference between a qualified and licensed home care provider and someone who lacks the training, qualifications and temperament to care for you or your loved one.

After you read these three columns in March, you'll know:

- How to differentiate between a "Medicare Certified" Home Care Agency, a "Private" Home Care Agency and Home Care "Registry"
- How you can benefit from the often confusing regulations governing the Private Home Care Sector in Massachusetts
- How to avoid the tricks, traps and pitfalls that unscrupulous home care providers may use to lure you into agreeing to services you don't want or need

The title of the first column will be "Why Knowing the Difference Makes All the Difference." **If you care about someone who needs home care, or who is currently receiving home care services, you need to share these columns with them.** Help them to make sure they truly know and trust the people whom they allow into their lives and into their homes.

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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