

Caring Matters

Navigating the Healthcare System

Primary care is the foundation of our health care system. The first line of contact patients and their families have with the health care system is usually through their doctor, nurse, or other medical professional.



Patients may subsequently be referred by the primary provider for specialized care at a hospital, a rehabilitation facility or a long-term care facility. Alternately, health care services may be prescribed within a patient's home. These specialized services can include nursing care, home care, physiotherapy and home-making services for people requiring assistance with daily living activities and wish to remain independent. The patient's needs are assessed by case managers, and services are coordinated to provide continuity of care.

As a registered nurse, working in hospitals and in the community, I have discovered first-hand how frustrating it can be for patients to navigate the health care system. Over many years I have learned that a family doctor's referral does not necessarily expedite the process as designed.

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Director's Message

Tucked away in our subconscious is an idyllic vision. We see ourselves on a long trip that spans the continent. We are traveling by train. Out the windows we drink in the passing scene of cars on nearby highways, of children waving at the crossing, of cattle grazing on a distant hillside, of smoke pouring from a factory, of row upon row of farmers' crops, of flatlands, valleys, mountains, rolling hillsides, city skylines and villages.

Upper-most in our minds is our final destination. On a certain day, at a certain hour, our train will pull into the station. Bands will be playing and flags waving. Once we get there so many wonderful dreams will come true and the pieces of our lives will fit together like a complicated jigsaw puzzle. We pace the aisles, damning the minutes for lingering - waiting, waiting, waiting.

But sooner or later, we realize there is no station, no one place to arrive once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream that constantly out distances us.

Stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream, go barefoot more often, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets, laugh more and cry less. Life must be lived, as we live each and every day.

The station will come soon enough.

(Edited excerpt from the Los Angeles Time Syndicate reproduced in an effort to encourage thought about how important living your life is.)

David Porter, CSA



Instructions for Life

- Call your mom.
- Talk slowly but think quickly.
- Be gentle with the earth.
- Silence is sometimes the best answer.
- Remember that your character is your destiny.

Myths and Realities of Old Age



Myths abound about "old age". Not only are these myths inaccurate, they often tend to marginalize the elderly.

John F. Kennedy once said, "The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie - deliberate, contrived and dishonest - but the myth - persistent, persuasive and unrealistic."

There are many myths about old age. Significantly, none are positive. All of them characterize aging as a less than desirable inevitability, a time of life defined by physical illness, senility, and helplessness.

The facts tell a different story. Today's seniors are healthier and more active than ever before. However, the myths of old age continue to be perpetuated through such vehicles as sitcoms, advertising and even birthday cards. The risk is that, if society and seniors themselves believe them, these myths can become self-fulfilling prophecies. The experience and wisdom of older Canadians and the contributions they offer to society, friends and family, are overlooked. Five common myths are:

The aging process is inevitable: While aging does affect the human body, choices such as exercise, nutrition, etc. can exert a major influence on the aging process.

Older people are set in their ways: When challenged and stimulated older brains can continue to develop until very late in life.

Older people are always sick: The incidence of disease does not increase with age. 75 percent of people aged 65 to 74 and 66 percent of those aged 75 and over rate their health as good, very good or excellent.

Being old leads to mental decline: It is not getting old but the lack of a stimulating lifestyle that leads to mental decline. Significant mental decline is due to diseases like Alzheimer's, depression and dementia.

Most old people are helpless and live in institutions: In fact, only 7 percent of Canadians over the age of 65 live in institutions. Even seniors with considerable functional impairment can continue to live at home with assistance from family and/or homecare agencies.

Sources: Veterans Affairs Canada; Statistics Canada; Seniors' Health Care Use 2006; The Community Health Promotion Network; "Atlantic Aging: Debunking the Myths," Longwoods Review, Volume 4, No 4

Preventing Traveller's Thrombosis

The term "traveller's thrombosis" refers to the form of deep-vein thrombosis (DVT) that occurs after a flight or drive lasting five hours or more. Prolonged immobility, especially in a sitting position, is one of the causes of DVT.



Thrombosis occurs when a blood clot forms inside the deep veins of the lower limbs. The clot partially or completely obstructs the vein and prevents blood from circulating freely. It can also break off and travel up to the lungs, causing a pulmonary embolism.

DVT Symptoms: There may be no symptoms if the clot forms in parts of the body other than the arms and legs. However, consult a doctor immediately if you experience any of the following after a long trip or several successive flights:

- Pain and swelling of a limb;
- Tenderness and redness of a limb;
- Vein feels hard to the touch;
- Sudden, unexplained cough;
- Coughing up blood;
- Sharp chest pains;

Preventing Traveller's Thrombosis:

- Exercise and stretching increase blood circulation and decrease the risk of DVT.
- If you are driving, take a break every two hours to stretch your legs.
- During a long trip, make sure you move your ankles, toes and legs regularly for a few minutes
- Stay hydrated by drinking water or juice.
- Avoid alcohol, coffee and tea, which dehydrate you.
- Avoid taking sedatives; you need to stay awake to move around freely.
- You may need to wear support stockings for the trip.

Source: Blue Cross - Health Bulletin (Fall 2008)

"The young man knows the rules but the old man knows the exceptions."
Oliver Wendell Holmes

Tax Benefits for Seniors

Tax Relief through the New Comprehensive Tax Package

Seniors will benefit from the measures aimed to help with the transition to the HST:

- 93 per cent of Ontario taxpayers will get a permanent income tax cut.
- Eligible families (including senior couples) earning less than \$160,000 will receive three payments totaling \$1,000. Individuals earning less than \$80,000 will receive three payments totaling \$300.
- A new refundable sales tax credit similar to the GST credit will be provided for people with low incomes.



The HST will not be charged on some items, including basic groceries, prescription drugs and medical devices.

Enhancing Ontario Property and Sales Tax Credits for Senior Couples

As announced in the 2009 Ontario Budget, the Ontario [Property Tax Credit](#) and [Sales Tax Credit](#) will be raised to better reflect the circumstances facing low-income seniors. Senior couples receiving the guaranteed minimum level of income from the government will receive the full benefit from these credits for 2009.

Doubling the Senior Homeowners' Property Tax Grant in 2010

The [Ontario Senior Homeowners' Property Tax Grant](#) is an annual benefit to help offset property taxes for seniors with low and moderate incomes who own their own homes.

For 2009, the maximum grant is \$250. For 2010 and subsequent years, the maximum grant will be \$500.

Source: Ontario Ministry of Revenue

Care Plan

A geriatric care plan is a way to help aging individuals ensure continued good health. According to HelpGuide.org, it can "improve their overall quality of life, reduce the need for hospitalization and/or institutionalization, and enable them to live independently for as long as possible."



Stemming from a geriatric assessment, a care plan ensures that families, aging individuals, and health care providers are all on the same page regarding health care and living arrangements, and that each knows his or her role in managing the person's needs.

Source: parentgiving.com

Summer Safety Tips

As summer approaches, seniors may want to get out and about in their communities. The National Institute on Aging says that's a good idea, but that some precautions should be taken.



Hyperthermia is its chief concern, and staying inside as much as possible on extremely hot days can help seniors, many of whom may be at higher risk due to poor blood circulation or the inability to sweat as a side effect of some medications.

For seniors who still want to head out, large air-conditioned areas like malls or movie theaters are good destinations. This also helps keep them around people who may be able to assist them in a potential heat related emergency, according to the NIA.

If you do choose to go outside, remember that plenty of fluids are a must. If symptoms like faintness or confusion occur, it's best to head to a cool, shady place and eat fruit or drink water to stave off potential dehydration.

Source: Retirementhome.com

Caregiver Burnout



Caregiver burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that may be accompanied by a change in attitude; from positive and caring to negative and unconcerned.

Burnout can occur when caregivers don't get the help they need, or when they try to do more than they are able either physically or financially.

Caregivers who are "burned out" may experience fatigue, stress, anxiety and depression. Many also feel guilty if they spend time on themselves rather than on their ill or elderly loved ones.

If you want to prevent burnout, consider turning to homecare agencies that provide personal support workers for short-term, long-term or respite care.

Source: myseniorsite.com

Navigating the Healthcare System *(cont from pg 1)*

As Director of Care for Living Assistance Services, an agency that specializes in providing homecare to seniors, my job is to ensure our clients receive the timely assistance they deserve.

Seniors may find it difficult to navigate the health-care system especially if they live alone. In Ontario, after a patient is discharged from a hospital, the discharge planner or social worker will organize access to home care through the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC). The CCAC will conduct an interview to assess the patient's needs. It is important to know that the home care services provided by CCAC are typically short-term and often restricted to a limited number of hours per week. Seniors may need to supplement this care with private or family caregivers.



In health-care, as in life, the more knowledgeable you are about the system, the better off you are in terms of navigating it and maximizing results.

My best advice to patients in dealing with the system as efficiently as possible is four-fold:



Information:

Currently, healthcare agencies and the government provide a great deal of information on the internet to help guide and accelerate the process of navigating the system.

Patients, especially seniors, may utilize the Internet but the importance of asking healthcare professionals the right questions should not be underestimated as this can usually accelerate the process of obtaining the right care, at the right place and at the right time. Information is power only if used wisely.

Advocacy:

Become your own advocate or identify individuals who can be your advocates. A significant portion of my job entails acting as an advocate on behalf of our clients. I have observed that at times, family members are so overwhelmed with the emotional and physical aspect of providing care to a loved one that, they simply do not have the energy to advocate on the loved one's behalf. Family and/or patients should also enlist their doctor's support and make him/her an advocate because he/she is a navigator and gatekeeper of various elements of the healthcare system. You should never feel shy or guilty about asking your doctor what to expect from tests or specialists and what will happen next.



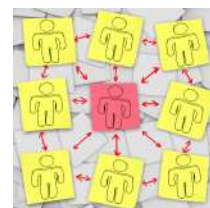
Self Management:

Self management will help you control your own patient care experience. For example, if you are being referred to a specialist, ask your doctor when the referral letter was sent and if it's

possible to obtain a copy. This will allow you to follow up with the specialist to make sure your appointment is booked. It will also eliminate the risk of your referral becoming lost, as sometimes happens. In addition, self management is useful when dealing with a complex system such as a hospital. For example, instead of waiting for the result of an ultrasound or x-ray and then having a blood test, you can enquire, "Could I get the blood test done while I am waiting for the ultra sound?" Self management of chronic diseases will also help you understand the disease in a thorough and thoughtful way. Seek out information and become an active participant in your own care.

Networking:

Networking will help you discover information and gain access to services. Make a list of family, friends and acquaintances who work in health care just in case you might need their help or advice.



Remember that there are things you can do to improve your own medical journey or that of your friends and/or family. Understanding the shortfalls, complexities and nuances of our health care system will help you navigate it effectively.

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