

Good Communication is the Key

The phone rings. Your spouse has just had a heart attack and is being admitted to the hospital.

This could be a one-time emergency. But if your spouse becomes incapacitated? Maybe it's an entirely different scenario: you're caring for a parent who has a chronic illness and can no longer perform every day tasks.

You are likely to feel overwhelmed, confused and frustrated. What can you do?

Prepare for a Crisis

Caregivers need to understand the person's beliefs, values and wishes so that they can act on the person's behalf if he or she becomes mentally incapacitated or unable to make health care decisions.

A power of attorney for health care (POA-HC) is a legally binding document that when activated grants the caregiver authority to make health care decisions based on the needs and wishes of the care recipient.

"It clearly identifies to health care providers who the care recipient wants to oversee his or her care," explains Dr. Lora Wiggins, chief medical officer of Care Wisconsin. "In Wisconsin, a family member is not automatically authorized to make health care decisions unless granted power of attorney."

Educate Yourself

Today, hospital stays are shorter, and people can expect to be discharged before they are fully recovered. Their caregivers need to:

- learn about the person's medical, physical and cognitive issues;
- receive a medication list with instructions;
- be trained on different care techniques to do at home;
- and find out where to go for community support services.

"Reasonable expectations are very important. To understand the course of a loved one's illness will assist the caregiver in providing proper care," says Marsha Cohen, a nurse practitioner in Partnership.

Keep Good Records

"Your observations and feedback are just as important as the care you provide," says Dr. Wiggins, who recommends recording what's happening in two distinct daily logs.

Keep a log for medications, dosage, prescribing physician and side effects. Then track changes in health, mood, memory and behavior in another log.

Before the next physician's appointment ask yourself, "What do I need to know to do my job as a caregiver?" Think about the main reasons for the visit and what you expect from the physician.

You may only get 15 minutes with the physician, so make sure you get the information you need.

- Review your daily logs and write down your concerns and questions.
- Practice your questions ahead of time with a family member or social worker.
- Be concise and discuss your most important concerns first.
- Get clarification about diseases, diagnoses, tests and treatments.
- Take good notes and ask that the physician's dictation be sent to you so that you have accurate instructions.
- If you feel a second opinion is needed, ask for it.

Find an Advocate

With Partnership, the care team coordinates all care and support services, eliminating the stress of navigating complex health care systems. The team also takes the lead in communicating with a member's primary physician and specialists. A nurse practitioner attends physician appointments and acts as the member's advocate.

For caregivers who don't have the support of Partnership, Marsha suggests asking family members, friends and neighbors for help. Local clinics, senior centers, churches and the area agency on aging also are good places to turn.

Check out the "Helpful Links" section of the Care Wisconsin Website for a list of local, state and national resources. To learn more about Partnership eligibility requirements and benefits, call (608) 245-3075 or (800) 963-0035. You also can complete the online Request Information Form.