

The Elder Expert

Palliative Care: Its Benefits to Quality of Life

By Amy Fuchs

Many older Americans receive their medical care in emergency rooms. Generally, this is because they are living at home and do not have access to their own physicians around-the-clock. If seniors experience a medical issue at home, typically they rely on calling 911, and that usually means a visit to the emergency room. And the Emergency Department (ED) in most hospitals is not the ideal place to receive medical care. ED visits are difficult for everyone involved, including patients, caregivers and family members alike. EDs are loud, bright and chaotic. It is not the ideal place to spend your time when you are in a frail and fragile condition.

Ideally, we would want a health care system designed to allow patients to spend their final months or years with their loved ones, in an environment that facilitates proper support and palliative care. Many seniors are now opting to receive their medical care at home and decide which treatment works best for them, and palliative care has become a more pronounced concept for physicians and their patients.

WHAT IS PALLIATIVE CARE?

Palliative care is specialized medical care for people with serious illnesses. It is an approach to medical care that improves the quality of life of patients facing life-threatening illnesses and their families and the problems associated with them.

Its primary focus is to prevent and relieve suffering by means of early identification, assessment and treatment of pain and other symptoms, such as depression, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, shortness of breath and fatigue.

Creating a palliative care plan to meet a patient's needs is a joint effort on the part of the patient and his or her physician since many factors need to be taken into account, including perhaps one's religious preferences, discussions with family members and self-reflection.

Not everyone decides to treat every symptom. Some may choose to only go to an ED when the symptoms become too painful or unbearable. Not every family member will understand or agree with this decision, but as long as the patient is of sound mind, not depressed and cognitively able to make these decisions for himself or herself, then these choices should be respected by all.

FINDING AN ADVOCATE

If one does decide to go to the ED for a medical issue, it is important to have an advocate there. This could be a caregiver, family member, friend, neighbor or aging life care expert. When patients are in a weakened state, they are relying on the hospital staff to have an understanding of their condition and provide appropriate care. Without a personal advocate, it is possible that their needs may not be met

in a timely manner. This is mainly because most EDs are often understaffed, especially if it is a high volume time of day or night or a weekend or holiday. The nurses simply cannot be there for everyone in a way that feels attentive and supportive.

Also, there are some instances when seniors may not have any support system in their community. For instance, their families may live far away, their friends may no longer be available to help and familiar neighbors may have moved away. These individuals are the most at risk during an ED visit and eventual hospitalization. While social workers at the hospital will advocate for them as best they can, they have limited knowledge of their background and concerns, and they have many other patients with many medical needs.

It is recommended that during a time when seniors are in good health they meet with an Elder Attorney to discuss options and explore how best to find an advocate to assist them during times of crises.



Amy Fuchs, LCSW, C-ASWCM, is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Certified Geriatric Care Manager. She has been assisting and guiding families for over 15 years. She founded The Elder Expert, LLC in 2008, a geriatric care management firm based in Bergen County, NJ. If you have a question or a topic that you would like Amy to address, email it to editorautumnyears@gmail.com