

## COMMUNICATING WITH PHYSICIANS

By Stephanie Wehrman, M.D.

### Coordinating Care For Your Loved One

When caring for an individual with Alzheimer's, it often becomes necessary to involve at least one, if not several, physicians. Since the patient cannot communicate his/her health history and concerns, it becomes crucial that the family become involved. There are many ways to improve communication with physicians.

Every Alzheimer person should have one primary physician to make coordination of care easier. This may be the family physician or an internist who has specialized training in geriatric medicine. However, for some patients, a neurologist or psychiatrist will be the primary physician if behavioral or neurological problems are predominant. The primary physician serves as the "hub" around which other medical personnel will gather. This person should know the full medical history, monitor medications, receive written reports from consultants and lab results, and should stay in direct communication with the family. If an Alzheimer patient does not have a primary physician, the family can make an appointment with a doctor of its choice to serve in this capacity.

In addition to having a primary physician, each Alzheimer family should select one individual to be the spokesperson for the entire family when talking to the physician. This spokesperson can then distribute information to the rest of the family. As a physician, it is much easier to talk to one person consistently rather than to field calls from two or three family members who may or may not be aware of the complexities of the situation.

## **How To Get Your Questions Answered**

When talking with a physician, it is important to state your concerns clearly and succinctly. Caregivers should write down and prioritize the problems needing to be addressed prior to the appointment as well as medications the person is taking. This gives the caregiver a chance to put thoughts together and be more organized with the doctor. Patients may have eight to ten different symptoms that are not all handled in one visit. Try to decide which are most important, and mention these to the doctor first. Also, know what medications and doses the person is taking. If side effects have been a problem, mention this also.

If you have many questions, it may be necessary to schedule an additional appointment just for discussion. Then neither you nor the doctor will feel rushed, and you will have more time to get the answers you need. If during the discussion with the physician, you do not understand something, don't be afraid to ask the doctor to clarify.

## **Facilitating Communication Among Several Doctors**

When additional physicians become involved in the care, communication may become more difficult. It may seem as though care is fragmented; for example, the cardiologist will prescribe medication for the heart, the orthopedic surgeon may prescribe pain medication for a hip fracture, and the psychiatrist will treat depression. It then becomes even more crucial for one person to monitor the overall status of the patient. Again, the primary physician should assume this role.

As caregiver, you can facilitate communication in several ways. First, if you schedule an appointment with a specialist, have the patient's medical records available at the time of the visit. This may involve signing a consent form to release hospital/physician records or it may mean that you actually bring copies of the medical records with you.

During the appointment, ask about any possible medication interactions that may arise in treatment. Be sure to ask about expected outcomes of treatments, possible side effects and length of time required for treatment. At the end of the consult, request that

the specialist send a written report back to the primary physician to document any changes and recommendations.

Although it may seem a challenge to get medical answers, please do not feel intimidated. Alzheimer's disease can be frustrating, but doctors try to be available and to help solve medical problems as they arise.

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