

## ***Health Care Partners Focus on the Whole Person***

### **Leann Panek, RN Care Coordinator, ProHealth Care, Mukwonago, WI**

The Alzheimer's Association celebrates their community partners who support the Alzheimer's and dementia community. We honor partner Leann Panek who is an RN Care Coordinator at the ProHealth Care Medical Group clinic in Mukwonago. She assists patients with managing their multiple and complex chronic conditions.

#### **Primary Care Approach**

Early health care intervention is important for patients with chronic conditions. "My main goal is to have patients understand the importance of a full diagnosis," says Leann. "We care for the whole person, including support resources to help families."



#### **Direct Connect Referral Program**

The Alzheimer's Association has a Direct Connect Referral Program with health care providers in Wisconsin. They provide critical behavioral support and education for families, to aid their primary care partners. All services are free and include:

- Ongoing support in dealing with the emotional impact of diagnoses
- Education on living well as the disease progresses
- Help in connecting to appropriate resources, including safety services
- Opportunities for building communities with others living with the diagnosis.

"Our partnership with the Alzheimer's Association is very valuable," says Leann.

"Patients and families don't always know about resources available to them. The Alzheimer's Association provides an extra level of support for my patients."

Jennifer McAlister, Program Manager for the Direct Connect Referral Program in Wisconsin reaffirms, "Our goal is to support primary care and become part of their team. We often support families experiencing behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia. We can lessen the load on our primary care partners by handling behavioral calls. When people get this diagnosis, there's no cure, but there is a lot we can provide on the care and support side to help people impacted by this diagnosis continue living their best lives."

#### **Timely Resources**

Some individuals have a hesitancy to seek out resources, often due to not wanting to face a diagnosis. Jennifer estimates that, even once made aware of resources, it can take up to 2 years for people to pick up the phone to seek those resources out. "The Direct Connect Referral Program is getting patients access to resources more quickly," says Leann. "I want my patients to have resources to cope, and my referral eliminates my patients having to handle one more thing." With patient permission, primary providers can refer a patient to the Alzheimer's Association and support can happen sooner.

#### **Importance of Behavioral Support**

"In primary care, we need partners who can help our patients with the emotional and behavioral support of a dementia diagnosis," says Leann. Coping mechanisms and communication strategies are a few examples of tips caregivers can receive from the Alzheimer's Association. "The Alzheimer's Association education and access to their 24/7 Helpline are also great tools for my dementia patients," she says.



### Increase in Referrals During COVID-19

There has been an increase in patient referrals from primary care providers through the Direct Connect Referral Program during COVID-19. Whereas in the past some patients may not have wanted to engage with additional resources, the disruption to daily life that social distancing has caused has created an opportunity for families to agree to having someone else come alongside them for care and support. "I've seen an increase in caregivers saying they need more help and someone to talk to," says Leann. "My relationship with the Alzheimer's Association gives me confidence to refer patients to them because I know the staff are very knowledgeable. Patients put their trust in me and I want them to be supported."

Leann has been a nurse for 30 years. We honor community partners, like Leann, who help support this fragile community.