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Bring friend to the hospital

Companion may help ease anxiety—and even pain

By Susan Kutchin Pallant

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When Denise Kozloff's sister was diagnosed with colon cancer about 10 years ago, the family was devastated.

"My older sister was my best friend," said Kozloff, a Chicago dental hygienist. "She took care of me, and I never expected she'd need to lean on me."

But then, she said, the family support system kicked into gear.

"My brother-in-law and nieces worked to maintain normalcy for my sister at home. Our brother is an oncologist, so he took charge and contacted the best doctors, and researched the most cutting-edge treatments. We drew on our personal strengths."

For her part, Kozloff said, "I saw my sister through endless tests and treatments. We walked, we shopped, we watched movies and we ate. I'd watch her knit, and we talked. Together, we listened to the doctors and got strength from each other."

Her sister died a year after her diagnosis.

Study of elderly patients

Walk into any doctor's waiting room, and you probably wouldn't be surprised to see an elderly patient with a companion. A study exploring the efficacy of companions and the elderly in medical settings, published this summer in the Archives of Internal Medicine, found that companions are actively engaged in the care process and add to patients' satisfaction with their care. A growing number of companies offer professional patient advocacy services that are designed to assist patients with everything from deciphering a bill to ensuring that a patient is properly taking a prescribed medication.

The elderly aren't the only ones who might benefit from a partner in health care. Whether a patient hires a professional advocate or relies on a relative or friend to help navigate our complex medical arena, the evidence that supports having a partner is building.

Patients can get anxious, making it difficult to understand and remember medical details. In one study, Roy C. Kessels, professor of neuropsychology and rehabilitation psychology at Radboud University in the Netherlands, found that patients immediately forget 40 percent to 80 percent of medical information provided by health-care practitioners.

"It's completely understandable that people have difficulty dealing with medical information during stressful times," said orthopedic surgeon John Hefferon, "but they don't seem to remember a thing. As soon as I tell patients they may need surgery, their ability to filter, reason and understand disappears.

"Every patient has been told, numerous times, exactly what to expect," said Hefferon, who is affiliated with Northwestern Memorial Hospital. "Yet while being interviewed by the anesthesiologist before a procedure, it's not at all uncommon for a patient to say, 'I don't know why I'm here.'

"The irony," said Hefferon, "is that the media urges people to ask a lot of questions about their care, but the reality is that the information that they recall may not be that important. Patients will remember insignificant details; they will have green stitches—not blue.

"In fairness, they cannot possibly educate themselves completely without several years of education."

Lynette Wilkos-Prostran, a registered nurse and orthopedic program director at the Neurologic and Orthopedic Hospital of Chicago, saw firsthand how high anxiety can interfere with judgment when her father was in intensive care facing bypass surgery. "Mom ran down one side of the hallway," said Wilkos-Prostran, "and my brother flew down the other hallway and lay down." Setting emotions aside, Wilkos-Prostran was left to ask the important questions and make the key decisions.

Support network

"Close relatives aren't always the optimal choice, but support of any kind can be valuable," said Wilkos-Prostran. A study published this year in the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* showed that patients with a large support network of family and friends report feeling less pain and anxiety before surgery. Wilkos-Prostran added, "Hospitalized patients who have visitors also recover much faster than those who are left alone."

Life is unpredictable, so it's always wise to have a plan. Who is your advocate, your second set of ears, if you become ill or unable to make clear-headed decisions? You may want to put your wishes in a letter, says attorney Stuart E. Grass, though he adds that a letter is a practical matter more than a legal one.

"Unlike a power of attorney that allows you to legally designate an 'agent' to make health-care decisions for you if you are incapacitated," said Grass, of Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP, "a letter is not legally binding, so share your wishes with the people closest to you."

Finally, give careful thought to your appointments, and Grass suggests your requests be updated annually, and on file with your physician, agent and attorney.

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