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Issues

Information and ideas for those
serving seniors.

on Aging

The NCSE helps assess dementia accurately.

Matrix AdvoCare Network recently held an informational seminar for care managers, trustees and attorneys working with elderly clients. The focus was on dementia in the elderly and the understanding of its impact on quality of life, medically and legally. Of particular importance was the discussion of an assessment tool for dementia called the Neurobehavioral Cognitive Status Exam (NCSE), the standardized test instrument used by Matrix AdvoCare Network. The NCSE was presented by one of its four authors, San Francisco-based neuropsychiatrist Jonathan Mueller.

Dr. Mueller, who is board certified in psychiatry and neurology, is one of the country's foremost experts in the assessment of dementia. He expressed his preference for the terminology "dementia syndrome," as opposed to the word "dementia." He said that the latter connotes irreversibility, while the former suggests a syndrome of multiple cognitive difficulties (one of which must be memory loss), and makes allowance for the reality that there are many processes at work that may lead to cognitive problems, but that not all are permanent or unresponsive to treatment.

Professionals need to be aware that although a confusional state may be the main presenting problem of a client, one must not assume dementia. We need to have ways to rule out variables that could be altered or removed for positive results. Some of these variables may be toxic agents, drugs, infection, or nutritional or metabolic imbalances. Dr. Mueller stressed that one cannot be too aggressive in looking for medications that can lead to confusional states.

A cognitive assessment is an essential part of the overall assessment of anyone over age 60 with medical or neurological problems. In reviewing the development

of the NCSE tool, Dr. Mueller explained how cognition is examined in a differentiated fashion. One must consider the person's behavior with reference to specific constraints and within the context of past and current variables.

All Matrix AdvoCare Network care managers are thoroughly trained to use the NCSE to assess cognitive functioning in several major areas, including orientation, attention and language, constructions, memory and calculations, and reasoning and judgment. Experienced interviewers can administer it in approximately 10-20 minutes.

The major contributions of the NCSE are:

- The ability to define conspicuous impairments in numerous areas of cognition. The instrument's greatest strength is its specificity.
- The provision of a baseline to document progression or reversibility of dementia syndrome.
- Its value as an educational tool for family, friends and other caregivers. It potentially allows a more empathic connection with the individual.

The practical application and importance of such a tool cannot escape the notice of concerned professionals and trustees. As a client's ability and agility decreases, his or her world shrinks. Accurate assessment is the key to informed, comprehensive and responsible decision-making that best serves the client's interests. The goal is to identify and access the appropriate resources to maximize the client's autonomy and quality of life. Many times this involves coordinating services, always based on data from the assessment process.

Dr. Mueller stated that the nurses' background and preparation uniquely equips them to inquire gently into the

issues of dementia syndrome. Nurses also arrange to meet clients within the comforting environment of the clients' homes.

Case review is a learning opportunity for everyone.

Matrix AdvoCare Network offers trust administrators and attorneys an opportunity to hone skills in identifying clients who may need help solving early health or social concerns. By providing timely assistance, larger problems can be delayed and crises prevented.

The case review process starts with a Matrix AdvoCare Network care manager meeting with a trustee or attorney who has a list of clients. While maintaining full confidentiality about client identity, they discuss demographic features and warning signs about the clients. The care manager evaluates several criteria about each client, and together they consider whether an assessment or other type of service is appropriate.

Trust administrators who have worked with Matrix AdvoCare Network for several years recently completed a case review of their clients. Comments included: "This was very helpful. It made me sit down and think about how my clients are doing." "I hadn't realized that so many of my clients were on the edge." "This made me think about the need for living wills for several of my clients."