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Issues

Information and ideas for those
serving seniors.

on Aging

Managing Dementia

Dementia is a condition of impaired mental function that affects as many as 3% of people between ages 65 to 74, 20% of people between ages 75 to 84, and 50% of people age 85 and older.¹ Early symptoms of dementia include forgetfulness, anxiety and suspiciousness. Dementia is progressive, with increasing symptoms of memory loss, word finding problems, confusion, disorientation and intensified personality traits. In the later stages, physical manifestations such as impaired swallowing, spastic movements and seizures can occur.²

There are many conditions which cause dementia. Alzheimer's Disease accounts for approximately 50% to 60% of all dementias, with strokes and multi-infarct (mini-stroke) syndrome causing another 20% to 30%. The remaining causes include depression, hormonal imbalance, Parkinson's Disease, alcoholism, mental illness, Down's Syndrome and others.

In some instances, symptoms of dementia may result from reversible conditions. It is essential that complete physical and psychiatric examinations be performed by expert geriatric physicians to ensure that any reversible conditions are identified and treated. Depression often causes dementia-like symptoms, and with proper treatment the dementia symptoms often resolve completely.

However, it is not possible to cure individuals with organic dementias from Alzheimer's Disease, stroke, multi-infarct syndrome and alcoholism. There is currently a drug available for Alzheimer's patients which slows the progression of the disease for 25% to 50% of those taking Cognex. There is a significant incidence of side effects from Cognex involving liver function which precludes its use for many people. Thus, rather than curing dementia, most often patients and families need to learn to live with and manage the condition.

Appropriate management of dementia includes maintaining optimal physical and mental health through regular medical care, healthy dietary practices, supervised exercise, a consistent and safe environment, and supportive interpersonal relationships. When an individual with dementia lacks any of these care components, s/he will likely experience a more rapid cognitive decline with mental and physical complications.

Most clients and families lack the knowledge and emotional resources to deal effectively with dementia. And most physicians do not address the physical

disabilities and psychosocial aspects of the disease which cause the bulk of the problems. A geriatric care manager is the ideal person to assist clients and families in managing the symptoms of dementia. To prevent unnecessary complications and emotional problems, early intervention is imperative.

The geriatric care manager begins with a thorough assessment of the client's general physical health, mental health, cognitive status, environment, and support systems. Any concerns and problems are identified, and a systematic plan is developed to address each concern. For example, a client who is disoriented to date may benefit from a daily "tear-off" calendar or newspaper to reorient him to the date. Another client who tends to wander will need an I.D. bracelet with a telephone number to call and an alarm system on the doors so that the caregiver is aware when the client opens an exit door. An individual who roams the house at night can benefit by an appropriate medication at bedtime, while a person who weeps continuously may need an anti-depressant.

Many clients with memory loss fail to secure appropriate health care services. The geriatric care manager will ensure that the client receives regular, thorough medical care to identify and treat any physical problems. In addition, regular dental, eye and podiatry appointments will be scheduled and transportation will be provided or arranged by the care manager to ensure attendance at scheduled appointments. Preventive measures such as annual influenza vaccinations will be arranged, and regular cancer screening tests will be scheduled during medical visits.

Another important function of the geriatric care manager includes teaching the client and family about the symptoms of dementia and how to best manage the symptoms. Caregivers frequently become frustrated when patients keep asking questions over and over. When caregivers understand that the patient truly doesn't remember, the caregiver can be less upset having to repeat the answers, or they can learn to change the subject to a more pleasant topic. The care manager also ensures that families and caregivers have adequate support, and encourages attendance at caregiver support groups and other such activities. In addition, the care manager may recommend literature about coping with the stress of dementia.

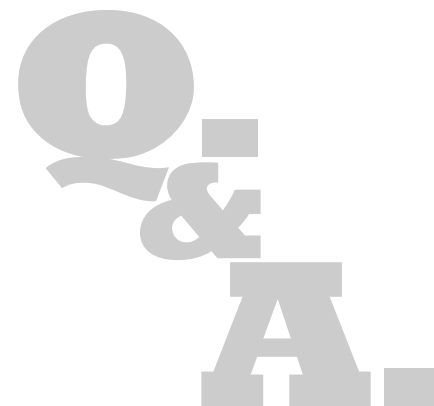
Because dementia is a progressive condition, it is important to help the client and family prepare for the future.

This includes recommending that the client and family consult an attorney for assistance with living wills, durable powers of attorney for health care and finances, and other areas of estate planning. Also, the family—and when possible—the client, are encouraged to visit facilities that provide dementia care so that when they need respite care or permanent placement, they have selected a facility with which they can feel comfortable.

The planning, teaching and support provided by a geriatric care manager can greatly assist the dementia client and family in managing the condition. Even though dealing with dementia is a difficult and challenging experience, it can also be a time of growth when adequate help is provided. Without support, though, it can be an ongoing tragedy resulting in expensive, unnecessary care and family dysfunction. Referring clients with dementia to a geriatric care manager is a positive step in managing this unfortunate condition.

¹ Evans, Denis A., *Prevalence of Alzheimer's Disease in a Community Population of Older Persons*. JAMA, November 10, 1989 — Vol. 262, No. 18, 2551-2556.

² Yurick, A.G. et. al. *The Aged Person and the Nursing Process* CT: Appleton & Lange, 389-397.



Q. When should I get help for my client who is somewhat forgetful and seems confused at times?

A. The sooner you get help for your client, the better! The early symptoms of dementia can be easily managed, while dealing with a severely impaired and paranoid person is much more difficult (and expensive). Also, people in the early stages of dementia often have a vague awareness or uneasiness that something is wrong, and may accept help more readily. When people become more impaired, they frequently have no insight into their problems and are very resistant to intervention.