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Coordinating home health care and medical care

Avoid pitfalls

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Your loved one just came home after receiving medical care: Now what? It's important for people to follow medical advice whether it comes in hospital discharge papers, from the clinic nurse who administered a flu shot, or in doctor's orders to a home health worker.

Unfortunately, receiving advice from multiple sources can present pitfalls. It can lead to a patient being prescribed medications that interact adversely. Plus, receiving advice from multiple sources can cause information overload. This can make it difficult for a person to remember and follow advice accurately, especially patients experiencing cognitive decline or those who are frail and live alone with little or no help.

The key to avoiding these and other pitfalls of coordinating home health care and ongoing medical care is to appoint an advocate for the patient. The advocate functions as the point person for everyone involved in the patient's health care. Here's what to do.

Steps to take

1. Designate someone to serve as the patient's advocate. This helps ensure that recommendations made by all of a patient's health care providers are followed, which requires teamwork
2. Obtain professional assessment to determine the level of home care needed and to get help choosing a licensed home care agency if one is needed.
3. If you select a home health care agency, you'll be asked to sign a contract for its services. Before signing, read the contract thoroughly. Ask questions about anything with which you do not agree or don't fully understand.
4. Understand the process for updating the plan of care provided by a home health care agency. Updating might be necessary if, for example, an employee is unsatisfactory or if health care services must be added.
5. Communicate all concerns to all members of the care team via an agreed-upon method, such as email.
6. Maintain a written journal of concerns and notes about the patient's daily functioning. This provides the same useful information to everyone involved in the patient's care.

Tips for advocates Responsibilities

An advocate should attend medical appointments with the patient, and correctly and succinctly report to the doctor the patient's daily functioning at home. Information that the advocate should report includes the patient's ability to comply with medical recommendations and any ongoing measures being taken to prevent rehospitalization or recurrence of acute problems. This information also should be recorded in the daily journal.

It is essential for the advocate to establish and maintain good communication with all members of the patient's health care and home care teams. The advocate should start by identifying key



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people in the patient's doctors' offices, the home care agency, the hospital, and clinics. Depending on the patient's ability to remember and accurately report the doctor's findings, the advocate should inform the home care team what the doctor recommends regarding medication changes, diet, or exercise.

Release of Information

Because a patient's medical information is confidential, an advocate should ensure that the patient sign a Release of Information form. This enables members of the health care team to communicate with each other and with the patient's family. Without this written release from the patient, none of the team members is legally able to disclose any information about the patient, not even to family members, including the patient's spouse and adult children. The advocate should request a blank release form from each entity that provides the patient's health care, make sure the patient completes and signs it, and return each form to the entity that provided it.

Is care coordination sufficient?

Indications that the advocate needs to fine-tune coordination include:

- Patient does not remember, understand, or follow a doctor's recommendation.
- Patient does not receive recommended follow-up tests and procedures.
- Prescriptions are not being refilled, new prescriptions are not filled, the patient is running out of medications too quickly, or is not needing expected refills.
- Repeated acute illness necessitates repeated hospitalizations.

- Physician is unaware of patient's other medical providers. This can result in medications being prescribed without the physician knowing about other medications the patient is taking. This can lead to overdoses or adverse medication interaction.

- Patient does not allow scheduled therapists to enter the home because the patient doesn't recall that the physician recommended therapy or that therapy was scheduled.


Paying for home health care

Medicare and private health insurance may pay for skilled care ordered by a physician who certifies the patient's medical need and homebound status. Skilled care may include visits for wound care; diabetes education and monitoring; in-home lab work; medication management; and physical, occupational, and speech therapy.

Medicare and private health insurance do not pay for ongoing custodial care that includes assisting patients with activities of daily living such as bathing, eating, and taking medicine. However, patients with financial means can purchase these services from private individuals or licensed home care agencies. Lower-income patients may qualify for help through their county's Elderly Waiver program; find out about this program at Senior LinkAge Line (see sidebar on this page).

Advocates make it easier

Without an advocate to coordinate the medical team, home care agency, and family caregivers, a patient's ability to recover from illness or medical procedures, or to continue living in their own home, can be severely compromised. This can result in slower recovery, faster health decline, repeat hospitalizations, or even worse outcomes.

Appointing an advocate to coordinate all the participants in your loved one's medical care lessens those risks and will help everyone rest easier. 

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Minnesota Department of Health
(651) 201-5000

Find home health care

Senior LinkAge Line
(800) 333-2433

Care Options Network
(952) 945-4065

Minnesota Home Care Association
(651) 635-0607

Care Providers of Minnesota
(952) 854-2844

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