

Geriatric Care Management: Caring professionals, expert advice

Geriatric care managers are a relatively new breed of professionals. Experts in aging, we guide families who are struggling with problems associated with growing older. Care managers can efficiently take the helm and plot a course for your family through a variety of confusing systems, such as fragmented healthcare services, residential care programs and ever-changing entitlement benefits like Medicare. A growing number of people seek out the services of geriatric care managers because of their reputation as expert problem solvers, advocates and teachers.

Navigating healthcare and aging services has become very difficult. Even experts in geriatrics have trouble. Renowned physician, researcher and author, Robert Kane, MD is the author of over 500 articles, books and chapters on aging. But he too felt overwhelmed and frustrated while trying to help his ailing mother. After her death, he began wondering if other healthcare professionals experienced similar frustrations. He wrote letters in professional journals about his experience and had over 200 doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers write back with their own troubling stories.

A broken, expensive system spells trouble for everyone

“Thirty years of practice and research wasn’t worth a damn. Basically, knowing people, being able to have direct contact [with medical experts] being able to seek out the best and the brightest in the field didn’t make the system work. If somebody with my experience and my knowledge couldn’t make the system work, I mean, what chance does the ordinary person who comes into this for the first time?”

“I don’t know how it’s going to play out in the future. But I know right now we’ve got a mess on our hands. I mean, we have a system that frankly is broke and is costing us a lot of money and it isn’t producing the results that we really would like to see for ourselves or our parents.”

—Robert Kane, MD

Interview, National Public Radio, 2005

As a result of his experience, Dr. Kane created *Professionals with Personal Experience in Chronic Care*, a group made up of clinicians who want to change the system. He is hopeful they can make a difference.

Realistically, however, change won’t happen overnight even with committed individuals like Dr. Kane taking the lead. His story illustrates why people are so desperate to consult with geriatric care managers.

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Common family confusion

Older adults and families often find themselves under pressure, floundering in the dark: seniors aren't sure of how to find the resources they badly need. Family members often have to make decisions for their parents quickly, without time to research the best options. If your mother's doctors disagree on a course of action, it's hard to know what to do. And, when your father moves from hospital to home or assisted care and then back to the hospital again, vital information might not be passed along. Seniors can be whisked through the system at such lightening speed they become confused about what they are supposed to do next.

Because things happen so quickly, family members are often left in the dark, yet expected to make major decisions for their parent, set follow-up care into motion, and keep juggling job, children and life in general. It's no wonder loved ones become exhausted and bewildered and seek out the help of a geriatric care manager!

Making people listen: Paula needs an advocate

Paula's dad, Fred, was 80 years old when sudden confusion and weakness landed him in the hospital. The ER doctor told Paula her father had pneumonia and a very low blood sodium level. Fred stayed in the hospital for three days before returning home. Paula looked in on her dad every day and he seemed to be recovering, if slowly. However, one evening, a week after coming home, Fred seemed a little confused again, so Paula took him back to the hospital.

The ER doctor couldn't find anything wrong with Fred but admitted him for observation. The next morning, the charge nurse called and told Paula they were discharging Fred to a nursing home. She was shocked. He had been living alone just fine until now. And, no one had consulted her about the discharge plan. Hospital staff told Paula her father was competent to make his own decisions and had agreed to the transfer.

Paula immediately drove to the hospital to see her father and discuss his decision. Stunned, she found him too weak to walk to the bathroom on his own and his speech was a little slurred.

A friend referred Paula to a geriatric care manager to find out her father's rights in the hospital. The care manager helped Paula appeal to Medicare for Fred to remain hospitalized for further tests. Paula won the appeal on her father's behalf. Subsequent testing revealed that Fred had suffered a stroke. But, because the doctors didn't know him prior to this admission, and did not have time to review his chart from the last one, they just assumed his behavior was normal, given his advanced age.

What is a geriatric care manager?

Geriatric care managers are multi-talented advocates with extensive knowledge about the needs of older adults. In a nutshell, they are jacks-of-all-trades. At the core of every care manager's skills is the ability to create innovative solutions to complicated problems. The best ones have honed their skills through years of working in the system with older people and their families. In addition to their substantial experience, they have advanced training in geriatrics.

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Many care managers begin their careers as social workers, nurses, occupational therapists or mental health providers. They may then choose to become certified in care management. To earn certification, care managers must have significant experience and pass a rigorous examination that demonstrates their knowledge and skill.

You might, as the family of an older adult, hire a geriatric care manager to help you coordinate and meet your caretaking and decision making responsibilities. Sometimes older adults obtain a geriatric care manager's services on their own as well.

The range of services geriatric care managers provide

You might contact a geriatric care manager regarding a specific issue or in the midst of a crisis. No matter the situation, there are many, many services available to enhance the life of the senior you care for as well as your own.

Comprehensive assessment

Consultation with your care manager generally begins with a comprehensive assessment (also called an evaluation that takes about two hours. For instance, if the senior in your life is your mother, her geriatric care manager will conduct the assessment in your mother's home or wherever she lives at the time. During the assessment, your care manager identifies your mother's abilities and needs by evaluating if she can:

- Walk steadily
- Carry out the basic tasks of daily life such as dressing, bathing and taking medications correctly
- Problem solve, for instance, find the exits in case of an emergency

In addition to testing an older client's mental acuity, care managers routinely review the person's medical problems, medications, financial resources and potential legal decisions, such as assigning a power of attorney. The care manager also evaluates for safety the residence where your mother lives, paying particular attention to hazards that may lead to falling, like loose rugs and an absence of stairwell handrails.

The completed assessment gives the care manager the necessary information needed to make recommendations to you and your mother.

Care plan

After completing an assessment, your care manager develops a care plan. This is a written document describing the findings of the comprehensive evaluation, listing areas of concern and providing specific recommendations for addressing any identified problems.

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Family conference

The care manager then arranges a meeting with you to go over the assessment and her recommendations. These family conferences help to communicate important information and get everyone moving in the same direction. Session goals include discussing everyone's feelings and concerns, presenting options to resolve identified issues and determining a course of action.

Care coordination

Clients often ask care managers to coordinate the tasks outlined in their care plan. This may mean hiring in-home helpers, arranging and transporting clients to medical appointments or arranging tours of various care facilities. Care coordination services are ideal for families who live far away; those who juggle multiple commitments; and for seniors who have limited help available to set up the services they need. Allowing the care manager to coordinate services makes all these demands less overwhelming and saves families valuable time.

Helping families plan and work together

Harry suffered from Parkinson's disease and lived at home with his wife, Sue, where he spent most of his time. Harry often fell and on more than one occasion, Sue called 911 to get him up off the floor. The last time he fell, he hit his head and fractured his hip. He went to the hospital and was eventually transferred to a nursing home for rehabilitation.

Sue was committed to bringing her husband home again. She contacted a geriatric care manager to coordinate a plan to keep Harry safe at home. The care manager introduced Sue and Harry to the idea of Adult Day Services. She helped them arrange minor home changes, like adding a wheel chair ramp from the driveway to the house and installing grab bars in the bathroom. She made other very workable recommendations and arrangements such as having a rotating schedule of helpers to assist Sue and Harry throughout the week.

During a family meeting, their children agreed to help with different tasks. Their daughter agreed to help Sue with grocery shopping and their son promised to transport Harry to his medical appointments. With the extra help in place, Sue felt very relieved. She now had time to take care of her husband and also take care of herself.

Other services

Care managers offer a variety of other services to help older people and their families, although not all care managers offer the same services. When you talk with perspective care managers, so be sure to discuss the range of services they offer.

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Additional services may include:

- **Advocacy**— Contact your insurance company to convince them to pay for things you need. Work with hospital billing departments to make sure you aren't overcharged. Make sure the assisted living community your mom moved into provides the services they promised.
- **Bill Paying** — Keep your parent's finances on track by paying bills, noting deposits, and maintaining accurate records.
- **Counseling** — Talk through hard-to-understand issues with any family members. Help everyone recognize their feelings and find ways to cope with a difficult situation.
- **Crisis intervention and services**—Work with the healthcare team if you parent lands in the hospital when you are out of town. Help find an immediate placement if your parent is kicked out of their care facility. (This actually does happen!) Help coordinate a hospital stay if your mom's dementia causes her to become suddenly agitated and violent. Help facilitate a family meeting if things aren't going smoothly. Evaluate your parent if they begin to express thoughts of suicide or disclose a self-harm plan.
- **Family education** — Describe in sufficient detail the medical realities of your parent's illness. Explain what measures families can take to help them cope. Tell them what they might expect in the future.
- **Guardianship**— Provide guardianship services if no other family members are willing or able to take on this monumental task. A guardian is appointed by the court to take care of another person or a person's property because the individual lacks the capacity to make their own decisions and take care of their own affairs.
- **Monitoring** — Keep an eye on your parent's living situation while you are away, make sure your mom is taking her medication properly, make surprise visits to the home after you hire a caregiver to make sure they are doing a good job
- **Placement in an alternative facility** — Help parents and families evaluate possibilities. Advocate for admission.
- **Power of Attorney**— Become the assigned power of attorney for seniors who have no one available to help with this important task. Power of Attorney is a document authorizing a person to act on another's behalf, for financial and/or healthcare decision making.

Finding and contacting a Geriatric Care Manager

Contacting the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers (GCM) is an excellent way to find a qualified geriatric care manager. The agency carefully screens professional applicants who must demonstrate their qualifications and present letters of reference. GCM allows families to search their extensive list of care managers on their Web site, www.caremanager.org. Once you have found a care manager you would like to work with, you can schedule just one consultation with her or set up appointments on an on-going basis.

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To narrow down your choices, ask all potential care managers the following questions and move on as soon as you hear an answer of “No.”

- Are you a member of the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers?
- Are you licensed in your profession?
- Are you a certified care manager?

Be satisfied with the answers to these questions:

- What are your professional credentials?
- What is your professional experience?
- How long have you been providing care management services?
- How long have you been working with older adults?
- How do you handle emergencies? Can I call for help after hours?
- What are your fees? (Obtain fees in writing.)

The price of help

Medicare does not pay for care management services but Secure Horizons (a Medicare HMO plan) does. Sometimes long-term care insurance plans and employee assistance programs cover some or all of the costs. The majority of the time, individuals who hire a care manager pay for services themselves.

The cost of geriatric care management services varies. A July, 2004 article in Business Week cited fees ranging from \$300 to \$800 for the initial assessment and \$50 to \$150 per hour after that. Of course rates fluctuate depending on where the client lives. For example, prices in major metropolitan areas will probably be higher than in rural ones.

Geriatric care managers do not accept fees, commissions or kickbacks from facilities or referral sources. Your care manager works only for you—not the insurance company, a facility or any other entity. This assures you unbiased recommendations and the highest level of objectivity.

Clients often feel that the advice of their geriatric care manager is priceless. While you pay an hourly fee, care managers can save you money by helping you avoid costly mistakes; for instance, moving your aging parent into an Assisted Living Facility that can't meet her needs or hiring an inexperienced caregiver without the proper references and background checks.

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Pledge of Ethics

All members of the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers promise to uphold the association's following pledge of ethics.

Provision of Service

I will provide ongoing service to you only after I have assessed your needs and you, or a person designated to act for you, understand and agree to a plan of service, the results that may be expected from it, and the cost of service.

Self-Determination

I will base my plan of service on goals you, or a person designated to act for you, have defined, and which enhance the decisions you have made concerning your life.

Loyalty

My first duty is loyalty to you. I will always provide services based on your best interest, even if this conflicts with my interests or the interests of others.

Termination of Services

I will end service to you only after reasonable notice. I will recommend a plan for you to continue to receive the services as needed.

Substitute Judgment

I will not substitute my judgment for yours unless I am acting in the role of your guardian, appointed by a Court of Law, or with your approval, or the approval of someone designated to act for you.

Confidentiality

I will hold in trust any confidence you give me, disclosing information to others only with your permission, or if I am compelled to do so by a belief that you will be seriously harmed by my silence, or if the laws of this State require me to do so.

Referrals/Disclosures

I will refer you only to services and organizations I believe to be appropriate and of good quality. I will fully explain to you any business relationship I have with any service I propose, and give you information on alternatives, if at all possible, so that you, or a person designated to act for you, can make an informed decision to accept or reject the services I recommend to you.

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Cooperation

I will strive to ensure cooperation between all of the individuals involved in providing service and care to you.

Qualifications

I am fully qualified in my profession to provide the services I undertake. I continue to improve my skills and knowledge by participating in professional development programs and maintaining certification and licensing in my profession.

Discrimination

I will not promote or sanction any form of discrimination.

Sources:

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