



*Area Agency on Aging, PSA 2*

# *Caregiving Series*

## **WORKING WITH THE DOCTOR**

*Your husband finally goes in for a check up, and the doctor tells him,  
"You just have to expect these things at your age."*

*Your mother tells you she needs some tests,  
but she doesn't know what they're for.*

Caregivers quickly learn they will have frequent contact with doctors, nurses, social workers, and other health professionals as part of their caregiving journey. Your loved one may have grown up in a time when you didn't ask questions and just did what you were told. Today we know the doctor can be most helpful when the patient is involved in his own care. If your loved one is not comfortable taking the lead, you can become his voice. With your loved one's permission, you can communicate with the doctor and be present during office visits. It is critical to respect your loved one's wishes about how much you are involved.

### **IT ALL STARTS WITH THE DOCTOR**

- If your loved one trusts and feels comfortable with his or her current doctor, introduce yourself and explain how you will be involved. The doctor should be easy to talk to, be willing to take time to listen, be open-minded, and be up to date on treatment and medication options. If the current doctor doesn't measure up, it is worth the effort to find one who does.
- If your loved one needs to find a new doctor, try to find a geriatrician (a doctor who specializes in the care of older persons) or a doctor who likes working with older persons. Ask what percentage of the doctor's practice is devoted to older patients.
- The primary doctor should be aware of all medical conditions and all medications the patient takes, and should coordinate all medical care and treatment.
- The doctor should be willing to make referrals to specialists as needed and should not rule out a procedure or treatment due to age alone.
- Find out if the doctor is affiliated with the hospital your loved one prefers, who covers patient care during his/her absence, and how to reach the doctor in an emergency.
- Be sure the doctor accepts your loved one's insurance.

### **COMPILE A MEDICAL HISTORY**

It's important for the doctor to know as much as possible about the patient's health to make proper diagnoses and prescribe safe and effective treatment. Compile a medical history and keep it updated. Include the names of all known medical conditions; test results; names and doses of all medicines, including over-the-counter medicines and vitamins; drug allergies; and any herbal remedies or alternative medical practices.

The doctor also needs to know about lifestyle issues that may affect treatment choice, such as abuse of alcohol or other drugs, smoking, or poor nutrition. Address problems such as memory loss, confusion, or depression that may interfere with the patient's ability to follow a treatment plan. Let the doctor know if your loved one still drives.

### **MAKE EVERY VISIT COUNT**

Get answers to your questions at every visit to the doctor and bring a tape recorder or notebook to record information and instructions. What is the problem? What is the treatment plan? Are there other options? What tests and/or medications are recommended? What are they for? What results should be expected from this treatment plan? Don't be embarrassed if you don't understand the doctor's answers. Keep asking until you do understand. You may ask the doctor or nurse to write down the diagnosis or to give you written instructions.

### **BE AN ADVOCATE**

You can be an advocate to assure your loved one receives the best possible care.

- Get a second opinion before choosing surgery or treatment for serious illness (after checking to see if your insurance covers the cost).
- Consider changing doctors if the doctor does not listen or explain things well.
- Be persistent with managed care or other insurers in getting needed care or specialist visits approved.
- Don't accept diagnoses or treatment options that could be based on ageist stereotypes.
- Establish a schedule for preventive care to help your loved one stay as healthy as possible.
- Keep accurate records of all contacts with health professionals, test results, medications, and inpatient or outpatient incidents.
- Do your own research. You can find a wealth of materials in bookstores, libraries, and on line. Just be sure the source is reliable.
- Be a team player. Just as you deserve respect, so do health professionals. No matter how frustrating a situation becomes, you are more likely to get what you need if you remain constructive, polite, and involved.

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