

Improving Doctor/Caregiver Communications

There is much to be gained by improving communications between family caregivers and health care professionals, especially physicians. Positive outcomes include: better care for the patient, less stress and illness for the caregiver, more efficient use of doctors' time, reduced costs for the health care system, and more satisfaction for all concerned.

In order to reap these benefits family caregivers and physicians need to gain a better understanding of each other's worlds. Both need to try, as hard as it is, to "walk in each other's shoes". The following guide is offered as a path for doing just that.

Tips for Doctors from Family Caregivers

- Be open and forthright.
- Think about the practicality of the treatments you suggest and consider their effect on the entire family, not just their medical efficacy.
- When you prescribe medications, be sure caregivers understand potential side effects so they know what to expect.
- In non life threatening situations, assure caregivers that every decision doesn't have to be made on the spot. Respect the right of the caregiver and the patient to think things over.
- Now and then ask the caregiver: How are you? Let them know you understand that illness and disability are a family affair.
- Be accessible—especially when a caregiver is opening his or her heart.
- Reach out to the caregiver—literally. A simple touch can mean a great deal.
- Be sensitive about where you talk to caregivers about difficult subjects—waiting rooms and corridors are not appropriate.
- Always explain as completely as possible all of the legal ramifications of life-saving actions.
- Be prepared to point caregivers toward helpful resources. Living with a chronic illness or disability requires more than medicine has to offer.

Tips for Family Caregivers from Doctors

- Write questions down so you won't forget them.
- Be clear about what you want to say to the doctor. Try not to ramble.
- If you have lots of things to talk about, make a consultation appointment, so the doctor can allow enough time to meet with you in an unhurried way.

- Educate yourself about your loved one's disease or disability. With all the information on the Internet it is easier than ever before.
- Learn the routine at your doctor's office and/or the hospital so you can make the system work for you, not against you.
- Recognize that not all questions have answers—especially those beginning with “why.”
- Separate your anger and sense of impotence about not being able to help your loved one as much as you would like from your feeling about the doctor. Remember, you are both on the same side.
- Appreciate what the doctor is doing to help and say thank you from time to time.