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What You Should Know When Caring for a Senior Parent

by Phillip Thornton and Marty Eng

George recently turned 83 years old, and he admits that he has “gone downhill” over the last couple of years. He has diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, arthritis, and prostate problems. Each day, he takes 12 pills and gives himself two insulin shots. George’s daughter, Sandy, is concerned about her father and wonders if his medical treatment is optimal. Recently, George has gotten lost a couple of times driving home from the grocery store. Sandy questions whether her father should still be driving and what role she should play in his health care.

This scenario is becoming all too common. Currently, more than 45 million people in the United States are 65 years of age or older, and that number is expected to double by 2050. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people over the age of 85 (the “oldest old”) is the fastest-growing segment of the population. With this increase in the number of older adults comes an increase in the incidence of chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart failure, and Alzheimer’s disease and, consequently, the need for more caregiving.

Adult children are often the first line of care for their aging parents. A recent *Huffington Post* article reported that the number of adult children providing complete care for aging parents has tripled over the last 15 years, and 25 percent of Americans are now providing personal care or financial assistance to their elderly parents. Since people are living longer, adult children now wrestle with questions about whether (and when) they need to take a more active role in their parents’ health care, what right(s) they have to information on their parents’ health and medications, and whom they should ask for this information.

Honoring Father and Mother

As Christ-followers, it is important to biblically examine what our role should be in the care of our parents. In Exodus 20:12 and Ephesians 6:2, we are commanded to “Honor our fathers and mothers,” which we should do even into our adult years. Psalm 71:9 and Leviticus 19:32 direct us to honor the elderly and not to “cast them off.” Such behavior requires open communication between ourselves and our parents, allowing us to share our specific concerns with one another.

This may require difficult conversations, such as “Dad, I don’t think that you should be driving anymore” or “You seem to be having trouble with your memory lately. Maybe we should get that checked out.” It is equally important for us to discuss with our parents what our roles in their care should be. With the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), our parents must now sign a release of information for us at each hospital, physician, or pharmacy they visit if they would like us to receive any information about their health. Because of this, our discussions with our parents should also include how much information we can obtain regarding their health — especially whether they will give us the right to information from their physician or pharmacist, and, perhaps, even whether or not they will allow us to visit their physician(s) or pharmacy(ies) with them.

Finding the Support You Need

It is often confusing to navigate the health care system, especially when a patient has multiple physicians. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of communication between providers, which can lead to inappropriate treatment or medical errors. If you or your parent(s) are over the age of 65 with three or more chronic conditions, or if you or your parent(s) are over the age of 80, the oversight of a board-certified geriatrician will often minimize inappropriate treatment and will allow one person to manage care from multiple providers. There are several websites where you can obtain lists of local geriatricians (see sidebar).

Another excellent source of information and advice, especially related to medications, is a Certified Geriatric Pharmacist (CGP). These pharmacists specialize in the unique needs of geriatric patients and understand how medications

uniquely act in the elderly. To find a CGP, search the Commission of the Certification in Geriatric Pharmacy website at ccgp.org/locate-a-CGP.

Many of us struggle with elder care issues — you are not alone. You will sometimes encounter challenges with time, finances, and conflict with aging parents regarding your role. Be sensitive to your parents' fears, needs, and desires. In many cases, your parents might realize that they have a need, but they might also be grappling with the potential loss of independence. During those times, dwell on 1 Corinthians 13 and Matthew 7:12. Love your aging parents and honor them. Treat them the way you hope your children will treat you. 🙏

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Caring for Aging Parents

1. **Have up-front discussions about possible scenarios.** No one likes to talk about death and illness. However, knowing the resources that are available and the inevitable decisions that need to be made are crucial in successfully navigating unexpected events in aging. For example, many patients have likely undergone aggressive treatments when it was not aligned with their values simply because no durable power of attorney (DPOA) had been assigned. But even those who do have DPOAs may not have a clear picture of what they want done medically should illness prevent them from being able to decide for themselves.
2. **Ask questions and get answers.** Whenever you do not understand an answer, ask someone from your parent's health care team for clarification. Even in uncertain conditions, you must have a clear understanding of what is going on. The Washington State Aging and Long-Term Support Administration provides clear information on many common topics at aasa.dshs.wa.gov.
3. **Be informed.** Ask your aging parents to share their medical information with you. Don't assume that their medications are being taken correctly or even that they should be continued without a detailed medication review. Learn when, why, and how medications should be given.
4. **Bring all medications and supplements to each health care visit.** Despite our best electronic medical records, there will always be a need to verify all medications that a patient is taking. If possible, create a list of medications that your parents are taking, including medication name, strength, how often they should take it, and when they should take it. Keep this list updated as often as possible. Don't forget to include over-the-counter products, herbal products, vitamins, and other supplements.
5. **Find a local qualified geriatrician and Certified Geriatric Pharmacist (CGP).** We recommend the Find a Physician directory at abfm.org, the Physician Referral option from americangeriatrics.org, and <http://www..>



Additional Reading

Age Power by Ken Dychtwald

Complete Guide to Caring for Aging Loved Ones, edited by Henry Holstege and Robert Riekse

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