

# The Symbiosis of Geriatric Care Management and In-Home Care: *Assisting the Cognitively Impaired*

By Suzanne F. McNeely



**Far too often,** when a cognitive impairment occurs, children are forced into the heartbreaking position of sending their parents to a nursing home or a similar community-based health care facility. Yet in many cases, early preventive actions such as intervention, planning, and resources would allow for much different outcomes. Seniors who are still capable of living moderately independent lives are sometimes thrust into the uncomfortable and undignified position of having their freedoms stripped away simply because no one is available to assist them with simple chores or personal care, or to monitor their daily intake of medications. Home care is the perfect solution to these simple assists, and by incorporating geriatric care management, it allows for the appropriate assessment and planning to be done up front. It also allows for ongoing monitoring and supervision as the care needs change.

### What is Geriatric Care Management?

Geriatric care management is tailored to fit a model where a caregiver provides individualized care within the home of the senior.<sup>1</sup> This care is usually supervised by a social worker, a nurse, or some other privately retained health professional. The caregiver may provide the care with regular visits or may actually reside in the home with the senior. The services provided by the geriatric care manager can take many forms. They may be medical and preventative in nature if the care manager is a nurse. When other health care professionals are needed to render aide and services to the senior, the geriatric care manager can coordinate. The fact that such care is individualized – as opposed to community-based, as with a nursing home – is one of its greatest advantages: the level of supervision, intervention, and coordination is adjusted to fit the condition of the senior in question.

Today the emergence of geriatric care managed home care offers several advantages. Among them:

- Offers a level of safety and supervision for early stage Alzheimer's disease or dementia;
- Safeguards the independence of seniors;
- Eases the transitions that must take place during the aging process;
- Relieves children of the burdens of geriatric care; and
- Provides geriatric care that is based on the situation and is free of bias and family dynamics.

### Early Planning Equals Ease of Transition

Any model for geriatric care should be designed to enable the senior to live safely in a self-sustaining manner for as long as possible. For a person who has a cognitive impairment, dementia, or Alzheimer's disease, everyday tasks that once came

easily gradually become more difficult. Driving and going out after dark will ultimately be out of the question, and simple chores like bathing, dressing, and using the toilet will follow.<sup>2</sup>

With cognitive impairment, there is also an increase in more serious medical concerns such as osteoporosis, macular degeneration, and incontinence.<sup>3</sup> The progression is sometimes gradual. Consequently, the increase of supervision should be correspondingly gradual.

Regardless of the family member's or caregiver's efforts to preserve and protect the elder's independence, in some cases this independence must be sacrificed in favor of the elder's safety. And many times, due to cognitive impairment, the elder will stubbornly refuse care. During this gradual declining period, the frail elder will often display a wide range of emotions. He may become angry, frustrated, and depressed, and his inability to perform certain tasks may be a source of embarrassment to him.

This is where the geriatric care manager steps in to ease the elder through the various transitions. The nature of geriatric care management – specifically the customized aspects of the relationship – makes utilizing a care manager for planning and care coordination the best way to identify issues as the cognitive impairment, dementia, or Alzheimer's progresses. Because the care manager is so familiar with the senior, he or she can work closely with the elder as together they evaluate the day-to-day tasks that must be completed based on a trusting, respectful relationship. Sometimes gentle persuasion within the confines of a professional relationship works wonders when it comes to making a cognitively impaired person more comfortable through the stages of the disease.

### Guilt-Free Care

Another clear advantage of using a geriatric care manager is the peace of mind that it provides to the children and other relatives of the elderly person. Having a parent or a loved one with dementia can have a serious emotional effect on children. As they see their parents' mental abilities slowly diminishing, children will become more aware of the hazards they face. A woman with Alzheimer's might cause a fire by forgetting to turn off the iron. An aging father wrestling with loneliness and depression may choose to quit eating. A diabetic grandfather may not know how or when to take his insulin.

One of the first emotions adult children might feel is guilt – particularly when they find they are unable to provide this care themselves. Allowing a geriatric care manager to step into this situation can bring relief for all. A care manager will assist by taking on the role the child would play, arranging the medical and household care that the elderly person needs.



## An Unbiased Opinion

Geriatric care management also produces an unexpected but nonetheless important benefit: not only does it protect seniors for their children, in some cases, it also protects seniors from their children – specifically from their unrealistic expectations and good intentions. Children often have a hard time acknowledging the fact that frailty and cognitive impairment are taking a toll on their parents' abilities. This is when the care manager can offer up something that the family doesn't have: an outside perspective – an unbiased view. Throughout much of their lives, children are accustomed to looking up to their parents – to being taken care of by them, to being raised by them, and to coming to them for advice. The idea of imposing restrictions on them can make children feel a bit insecure – even ashamed.

It is to the elderly person's benefit that the care manager broaches difficult topics and seeks solutions. Such action may result in the prevention of serious accidents or even death.

## The Nexus of Care

As a person starts to show the effects of Alzheimer's disease or dementia, the act of managing his or her care becomes increasingly difficult. Undoubtedly, the number of medical specialists involved in maintaining his/her physical wellbeing will increase. With so many specialists micromanaging the elder's health, the "big picture" is often overlooked. It is important to maintain clear lines of communication between these specialists, lest one of them prescribe a treatment or medication that might have detrimental effects on another treatment plan prescribed by a different specialist.

With the wide variety of possible concerns, it's not surprising that the geriatric care manager must be a jack-of-all-trades, managing so many different aspects of the care. They manage the various medical specialists that prescribe treatments. They may be called upon to manage the care of the household. They may manage daily financial matters. They manage – to varying degrees, depending on the physical and mental condition of their charge – the life of the senior.<sup>1</sup> They must, in short, see the "big picture".

## Making Referrals

In today's cultural landscape where scams and identity theft increasingly target seniors, care must be taken to ensure the care manager is both qualified and honest.

Pay close attention to the credentials of any care manager who is sought to work alongside of a home care company.

Additionally, any prospective candidates should be members of the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers. Membership in this organization requires allegiance to ethics codes and standards of practice.<sup>4</sup> There are other considerations to bear in mind as well. For more information, see the checklist provided with this article. Together with a home care agency, and by working hand in hand with seniors, families, nurses and other health professionals, care managers can create a brighter world for the elderly in the 21st century.

## CHECKLIST: What to Look for When Choosing a Geriatric Care Manager (GCM)\*

Does the GCM:

- \_\_\_ Have an advanced degree in a related field, such as gerontology, psychology, or social work? or
- \_\_\_ Have a registered nurse degree? or
- \_\_\_ Have any public health experience?
- \_\_\_ Does the care manager have certification as a GCM?
- \_\_\_ What kind of experience does the GCM have?
  - \_\_\_ Length of time working directly with the elderly?
  - \_\_\_ In a setting that required direct care and understanding?
- \_\_\_ Does the GCM belong to any professional associations, such as the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers?
- \_\_\_ How often is the GCM available? Can she be called on any day of the week? At any time of day?
- \_\_\_ Is there a back-up plan in case the GCM is unavailable?
- \_\_\_ How does the GCM charge for services? Does she charge for time spent on the phone? Does she charge for travel?
- \_\_\_ What sort of references can the GCM provide? Do these references include other providers of health and human services for seniors like hospitals, nursing homes, and residential living communities as well as attorneys and trust officers?
- \_\_\_ Is the GCM bonded? Does she carry professional liability insurance?

\*This checklist is based on a similar checklist which appears in *The Handbook of Geriatric Care Management*, which is cited in the References section.

## References

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