

Learn to Advocate for Your Hospitalized Loved One

Hospital stays can be a tense and uncertain experience for patients and families alike. But a family caregiver who can act as an advocate – asking the right questions, keeping track of hospital staff and their instructions, monitoring medications – can make all the difference in a hospital stay.

The concept of family advocacy is something more and more hospitals are becoming receptive to. Hospitals are seeing the primary caregiver as someone who can have a positive effect on the level of care and help prevent potential problems. In turn, more family members and caregivers are thinking of themselves less as visitors and more as patient guardians and advocates.

How best to shift into advocate mode when your family member takes a trip to a hospital? Here are some tips.

Ask Questions

The number one thing is to ask questions and find the people who can answer them. If you are intimidated by the doctors or the health care process, start with the nurses on duty. They have the most vested interest in keeping the patient comfortable and safe.

So when hospital staff members use acronyms or terms you don't understand, ask them to explain. Try to determine the pros and cons of tests and treatments and whether they are truly necessary. If you are uneasy about speaking up, bring in another family member or friend to serve as a go-between. Don't feel as though you must do it alone.

Have a Pad and Pen Handy at All Times

So many people come in and out of a hospital room, and it can be hard to keep track of who's who and what each one says. Ask for business cards and write down identifying details on the back of each. A notebook will help you keep track of important information, such as the names of the doctors, nurses, and any specialists, as well as medications (see the next point). Note the date and, if necessary, the time of your entries and use it as a reference when asking questions. **Tip:** A journal can be especially handy at discharge, when you want to be clear on directions for home care.

Be on the Lookout for Mistakes

Medication errors can occur in hospitals. Be sure all medical personnel are aware of any allergies or side effects your family member has experienced to common drugs. Make a list of your loved one's medications, as well as dosing information and schedules, and be aware of any changes that occur in the hospital. Note any new medications and don't be afraid to ask what each one is for, how long your loved one will need to take them, and what sort of side effects to look for. If necessary, ask nurses to read the drug orders aloud.

Keep Your Family Member Grounded

A hospital stay can lead to disorientation and in some cases delirium, especially in the elderly. Keep your family member grounded and comfortable by letting them know what day it is and showing them the newspaper. Read and talk to them in reassuring tones, and bring in their eyeglasses, hearing aids, dentures, and familiar objects from home. Be aware of the signs of delirium. Some medications, especially narcotics (such as Haldol), can make older people more prone to

confusion. Ask whether medications that do not pose this sort of risk are appropriate.

If you have any serious concerns about your family member's care and feel that their needs are not being addressed by hospital staff, reach out to the hospital ombudsman or patient advocacy department.