

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Senior Care

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Receiving Person-Centered Care Later in Life

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Person-centered care has gained national attention in recent years as a mechanism for transforming the health care industry. Sometimes referred to as patient or resident-centered care, supporters agree that person-centered care will improve the quality of care and life embraced by patients.

Person-centered care is a philosophy of individuality, respect, choice, dignity and independence for residents of independent, assisted living and nursing home communities. It supports a culture of mutual respect by placing decision making with the senior, de-institutionalizing the delivery of care while helping seniors focus on pursuing overall wellness.

For healthcare providers in a senior living community, person-centered care is more than asking “any questions?” at the end of a patient visit. It requires collaboration across multiple teams—physicians, nurses, housekeeping, social workers, event coordinators, dining staff, etc—to adjust routines to meet the needs of the senior, rather than the seniors being required to adapt to the needs of the community.

Consider a situation in which a senior may be well cared for in terms of their health and nutritional needs, but unhappy that they have to bathe in the morning when they prefer an evening shower. This kind of care requires everyone in the senior’s life to take the time to get to know their personal preferences. The outcomes—the patient feeling respected, involved and important—are desirable in and of themselves, and may even mitigate a patient’s path to depression.

Experts at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), as well as many state governments including New York, have praised the person-centered approach as a way to improve the health care system. Even so, the concept is still gaining prominence. Some caregivers, both physicians and family, fear that seniors will make “bad” choices. For instance, a senior may not want to take his or her chances with a risky surgery, even if the outcome a poorer quality of life. Or, he or she decides to enjoy a bag of potato chips while on a low-salt diet. In the end, it is all about control.

Since its origination in the late 90s, the person-centered initiative has come to be known as a gold standard of care for patients with dementia. Instead of treating a patient with dementia as a collection of symptoms and behaviors to be controlled, caregivers consider the whole person. What type of music do they like? Do they prefer the pill or liquid version of their medicine? While not always able to articulate a choice directly, the priority is to get to know the senior’s habits and adapt routines to meet his or her needs.

I truly believe that if we place the person at the center, we have a real opportunity to improve the quality of nation’s health care. The partnership benefits both the senior and the caregiver, while allowing the senior to live every day as he or she would chose to live it.

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