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Patient Powerline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

Medical Problems Close to Home

Dear Friends,

Two months ago my dad was diagnosed with a thoracic aortic aneurysm. The major artery that carries blood away from his heart to all the vital organs had an area of thinning or weakening. His doctor was worried that if it wasn't fixed, it could someday rupture. At 77 years of age, my dad was not enthusiastic about another major surgery. He remembered all too well what he went through when he had a heart bypass operation just four years earlier. His doctor agreed more surgery would be risky. His doctor told to him about a new procedure that could repair the aneurysm without actually cutting open his chest. A synthetic stent or tube could be custom-built for him and placed into his aorta by passing it through the arteries in his groin. The stent would effectively strangulate or cut-off the aneurysm. The problem, however, was that his doctor didn't know where the procedure was done. By doing a little homework, my husband and I learned that the experimental procedure could be done right in our own backyard - the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

A Health Buddy Can Save Your Life

Because of a critical blockage in his carotid artery as well, my dad is in the process of undergoing a two-part procedure to prepare him for this non-invasive surgery. My family and I spent the past week in the hospital as his health buddy while he underwent the first procedure to clean out his carotid artery. We took turns making sure that one of us was with him at all times. We were all incredibly busy keeping the nurses informed of his progress, helping him to get out of bed, encouraging him to take deep breaths and use the breathing machine and even get him to exercise his legs so he wouldn't get blood clots. I am beginning to think that another good name for a health buddy is a "health coach". A patient who is sick enough to be in the hospital can't necessarily speak up to get the care they need. This experience reminded me yet again how important it is for all of us help out when someone we know is about to enter the hospital.

Medical science has led to such phenomenal breakthroughs such as this experimental stent for my dad's aorta. But doctors and hospitals can only do so much. Health care system today is pretty complicated. There are lots of specialists and time-stressed family doctors, which means no one person is in charge. As I have said so often in my book, *How To Save Your Own Life*, http://www.drsavard.com/system_book.htm, the secret to getting the best care possible is to do what no doctor can do for you. That means taking charge of your health - or the health of someone you love.

Getting the Best Hospital Care

Here are some tips for taking charge and getting the best care while in the hospital.

- Bring all your vital health information to the hospital with you. Your doctor cannot remember every medicine you take, your allergies, or your family history and medical conditions (my dad couldn't remember the dose of medication he was taking or the results of his latest kidney test off the top of his head but it was right there in his *The Savard Health Record*, http://www.drsavard.com/system_record.htm, binder for everyone to see). Bring your up-to-date emergency health card, http://www.drsavard.com/system_record_excerpt1.htm, your living will and a copy of all your medical records. Having this information available to everyone who cares for you can prevent miscommunication and actually save your life.
- Have a friend or relative stay with you. A caring companion can get you water when you need it, help you to the bathroom, and command the attention of doctors and nurses when necessary. Your companion/buddy can

take plenty of notes. Keep a note pad at the bedside to list questions, observations and concerns. Use this information to communicate to other family members, nurses, or the many doctors who come in and out. Don't take anything for granted. If you have a concern, question, or something just doesn't seem right - speak up!!!

- Identify your point person or attending physician. On an average day, a hospital patient might talk with her family doctor, surgeon and/or anesthesiologist, and an ever-changing cast of interns and residents. It's not uncommon for patients to get conflicting information about their care from all these professionals. You need a point person who can sort everything out and answer your questions. Typically that will be the attending physician. He's the doctor on record at the hospital as being in charge of your case. If you don't know, ask the nurse to identify this person for you.
- Obtain your daily schedule. Each day, the nurses receive a "plan of care" listing tests you're scheduled for, meals ordered, and special instructions from your doctor. They also receive a separate list of all medications that have been ordered for you. Each morning ask your nurse to go over these lists with you to ensure that mistakes don't occur, such as undergoing the wrong test or getting the wrong medicine.
- Get to know the staff. You want the nurse, technicians and other staff members to see you as a real person - not just another face in a hospital bed. Your 'health buddy' will be a tremendous help to the nurses and hospital staff. Ask the hospital staff how your friend or family member can assist them.
- Get a copy of your discharge summary. After your hospital stay, the hospital provides a summary of your treatment to your attending physician and any other doctors he designates. You should get a copy of this summary, too. The report provides important information for you and any physician who treats you in the future. It lists the reason for your hospital admission, important test results and surgical findings, medications prescribed and the recommended future plan of care. Give your attending doctor a self-addressed stamped envelope to remind them to send you a copy. If you have surgery, ask your surgeon for a copy of the operative summary as well. This, too, will help your future treating doctor know exactly what was done.

I am happy to say that my dad is home recovering from the carotid artery surgery and grateful that everything turned out okay. He also thanks each one of his children for taking the time to stay with him and be his "health buddy".

Remember, you don't need special medical training to be a "health buddy" - just lots of common sense and the confidence to speak up and ask questions. I think a hospital stay without family or friends can be very lonely - even frightening and unsafe. If you have a friend, neighbor, or family member who needs to be in the hospital, get together a team of caring people who can take turns being there. No one cares or knows more about you or your loved one than you.

Warm regards,

Marie Savard, M.D.

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