

January 2003

PATIENT POWERline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

RE: Health Buddy - spreading this message does make a difference

Dear Friends,

It has been two long months since my last newsletter, filled with lots of care giving and worry about my father-in-law. As you may remember, my 81 year-old father-in-law was recovering from major heart surgery last fall. By early December he was well enough to return to his home in Florida. As luck would have it, he developed a severe infection in his right knee two weeks after he returned, sending him right back to yet another hospital.

His right knee had severe degenerative arthritis (also called osteoarthritis) and was giving him a lot of trouble for the past few years. Right before he returned home he had a shot of cortisone into the knee joint, hoping to get some relief of pain. The shot worked, but who knows, occasionally simply putting a needle through the skin into the joint can lead to an infection. After his prolonged recovery from surgery his immune system was probably not completely up to speed. I share with you the part about the shot only to remind you that anything we do to our bodies has potential risks and rewards. The more we know about both the risks and rewards, the better our treatment decisions will be. We all thought the shot was worth a try.

Fortunately when he arrived at the hospital he had all his medical information with him to help his doctors give him the best possible care. My mother-in-law brought his Health Record (http://www.drsavard.com/system_record.htm) that contained all his medical information, including his hospital discharge summary, operative report and most recent laboratory test results. (They have heard me speak so often about the importance of asking for and keeping original copies of medical records that they knew just what to keep with them.)

His children all took turns traveling to Florida to be with him. I have talked about the importance of a Health Buddy - a friend or family member to be with you during important office visits and hospital stays - many times before. This time I can truly say having his family by his side in the hospital - questioning the doctors and nurses and keeping up on every pill and test he took - made all the difference.

At one point I noticed he was very sleepy and a bit confused during the day time hours (seniors often get confused at night in a strange setting - something called "sun-downing") yet he wasn't getting any medications during the day to cause confusion that I knew of. I asked his nurses if we could look at his hospital medical records (the patient is entitled to look at his own records but he MUST give permission for anyone else to take a look). Although asking to look at his medical record wasn't easy, I knew that often times the medical record has important clues as to what may be going on. The nurses agreed and had my father-in-law sign a release allowing me to take a look. We discovered he was getting two Percocet pills (narcotic pain

pills) at night to help ease his leg spasms and help him sleep because the doctor had ordered, "1 to 2 Percocet tablets every 4 hours for pain". We asked the doctor to cancel that order and give him extra strength Tylenol instead. With! in a day he was backed to his old self - awake and ready for physical therapy.

My father-in-law was very sensitive to sleeping pills and pain medications, a fact we failed to write down on his emergency health card (okay, so even the creator of the system isn't perfect). Believe me, his card (http://www.drsavard.com/system_healthcard.htm) now contains all the important information any doctor or pharmacist needs before giving him any medication or treatment. My family is more convinced than ever of the importance of speaking up and asking

I could write on and on about our experience in the hospital and rehab center - and the importance of having an advocate Health Buddy - but I think by now you get the picture. Sometimes I think I was meant to have all these Health Buddy experiences so I could spread the word as to why it is so important.

My father-in-law is now at home, getting stronger and walking a little bit better each day. I tell you this story to remind you - it is never too late to start collecting your medical records, filling out an emergency health card to keep with you AND volunteering to be a Health Buddy for someone you love.

Warm regards,

Marie Savard, M.D.

Marie Savard, M.D. is an internationally known internist, women's health expert and champion of patient empowerment. She is the founder of The Savard System, dedicated to teaching patients how to manage their own healthcare. She is the author of two highly acclaimed books, *How to Save Your Life: The Savard System for Managing-and Controlling-Your Health Care* (Warner Books, Inc. 2000) and *The Savard Health Record: a Six-Step System for Managing Your Health Care* (Time-Life, Inc. 2000).

On January 16, 2003 Dr. Savard was quoted in an article for The Wall Street Journal titled "The Informed Patient" by Laura Landro which helped tremendously in getting her message out.

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