



Hospital Column for June 30, 2010

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Don't wait until it's too late to get help

My mom is in a memory home in Kansas City. During my dad's long and torturous slide toward death two years ago, she neglected her own health while caring for him. She became depressed and suffered a series of mini-strokes, which sent her to the hospital on more than one occasion. She was eventually diagnosed with stroke-induced dementia after it was too late to reverse the damage.

Their community didn't have the facilities or her physician the skills to help her. In hindsight, I see that we should have brought her to Geary Community Hospital's Senior Health Center and put my dad in hospice care, but at the time, we were just trying to get through each day and respect their wishes.

The Senior Health Center (SHC) is an inpatient geriatric mental health unit for seniors 55 and older. Seniors exhibiting psychological problems receive complete medical and psychiatric evaluations, which includes diagnostic testing, an individual treatment plan and comprehensive discharge planning. It might have made all the difference in her case.

If mom had been evaluated earlier, she might have been treated and given appropriate psychiatric and medical attention that would have staved off or delayed the reality she's living with today. She's reasonably happy in the memory home, but she doesn't know me or anyone else from her former life. Unlike Alzheimer's, which can cause a personality change, mom is as gentle as a lamb---small comfort for a mind lost forever.

Other mental disorders that can be diagnosed and treated in the SHC include debilitating depression; changes in perception, memory, or judgment; severe grief; thoughts of harming oneself; unsafe behavior that may put oneself or others at risk; hallucinations; and emotional distress due to life-threatening medical illness.

If mom had been admitted early on (for the usual seven-to-ten days) on the hospital's SHC, she might have retained some of her sharp wit, her love of reading and doing the New York Times crossword puzzles, and her socialization skills with friends. All of this, once lost, was lost forever in her case, leaving her a mere ghost of what she once was.

The treatment team includes experienced nurses, a masters-prepared social worker, a psychiatrist, the patients' medical doctor, an activity therapist, and physical, occupational and speech therapists, as needed. Knowing these people as I do, I know they would have diagnosed and treated her illness and, at the very least, given her more time to enjoy her life after my dad's passing.

So many seniors wait until it's too late to get help. They, like my parents, are frightened to lose their independence and in deep denial of their own mortality. They fear ending up forgotten in some nursing home. They forget that mental health units, like that at Geary Community Hospital, are there to help them live better lives.

So, please, don't wait until it's too late. If you have a friend or family member who has become confused, disoriented, depressed, or is acting out, call the Senior Health Center at 238-3480 or toll-free at 1-888-550-3414 for a free consultation and evaluation. There is no shame in seeking help.