

Independent Living Skills workshop: Navigating the Health Care System

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Guest Speaker:

Chris Curry – Executive Director (Retire at Home), Board Member (Council for London Seniors)

The London Council for Seniors Health Committee developed a brochure which shares information about the health care system. The brochure covers things like patient rights and what to expect during each stage of a hospital stay.

Chris explains that the biggest issue for patients is communication with health professionals. The hospital and its staff have many priorities to deal with, even outside of patient care, and this sometimes means that the communication with patients is spread a bit thin. He stresses that people should know their rights so that they know what they can expect from the hospital and health care professionals.

For example: You can say NO to being discharged from the hospital after a stay. You must provide a valid reason for your refusal, but saying no will begin a very important discussion. Needing time to make arrangements for care/support may be a valid reason to refuse discharge. At this stage it would also be important to ask for information about the different supports available to you once you are discharged (eg. referral to care agencies), or to request a detailed list/explanation of what your aftercare requirements will be (eg. if you need to have a nurse visit your home or if you should be staying somewhere with 24 hour nursing staff available). These things will all differ depending on your initial reason for hospitalization, your current condition, and any additional health concerns.

Chris also stresses that it is a good idea to have a support person (or family member) attend health care appointments/meetings with you. It is always an advantage to have a second person who might remember something you forgot to ask or to listen for something you have missed. Having a second person is also good because they will be able to speak on your behalf, if you feel as though your concerns are not being acknowledged or if you're having trouble communicating your concerns. Another suggestion is to take notes about what is happening with your care, to help you remember the details about your treatment and interactions with the health care team. If you are dealing with more than one specialist/doctor/care provider they will meet to discuss your goals, progress and treatment options. You are entitled to be a part of these meetings (or to have someone attend them on your behalf) and you can request the "meeting minutes" from any meeting your health care team has to keep for your records. This way you are an active participant in your own care plan and it gives you a better understanding of what is happening with your care so that you are able to make informed decisions about treatment options and next steps.

Discharge is the part of a hospital stay where patients experience the most issues. The hospital is supposed to give you as much notice as possible if they are planning to release you, but this whole process can happen much faster than anticipated if other things come up that the hospital must deal with. Again, you can refuse discharge, but there are some rules about when the hospital can charge you

and how much they can charge for continuing your stay. These are briefly covered in the brochure, and you can call the Council for London Seniors for more information.

It is also important to note that follow-up instructions for your care after discharge are sometimes vague. Taking notes about what the doctors and nurses say you should be doing is important to help you remember these things as well. Having a support person or family member present for these discussions is also helpful because they may have questions that you didn't think of and they will be able to help you make sure you get all the information you need to feel comfortable. For example: a family member may be able to help you decide to hire a nurse who does home visits or if it would be better for you to be discharged into a care facility with 24-hour access to nursing staff until you're fully recovered.

If you are feeling disrespected by any hospital staff, you need to speak with the ombudsperson of the hospital. They will help to clear up any issues or help you lodge a formal complaint if necessary. You would speak to the ombudsperson about any complaints, even if you are an out-patient. Chris notes that asking health professionals/care providers for their names once you begin working with them regularly may help to ensure they always treat you respectfully. For any legal issues where you feel as though your concerns are not being heard, you can contact the Advocacy Centre for the Elderly to find out your rights and receive legal advice. They also have a program called Legal Shield, where clients pay a small monthly fee to get unlimited legal advice including, writing letters on your behalf, requesting access to information etc. Chris stresses that it is the "squeaky wheel that gets the grease", so if you have a concern, speaking up and communicating with medical and/or legal professionals is the best way to ensure that your concerns will be addressed.