

# BULLETIN



ALLEGHENY COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY

## The Role of Professional Geriatric Care Managers

Geriatric care in the 1990s has grown increasingly complex because several major trends are occurring simultaneously.

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People are living longer and, consequently, becoming subject to the health, financial, social and other problems that affect the elderly.

Health care, under the lash of managed care, is becoming ever more complicated and confusing for lay consumers. Adult children—traditionally the principal supports for elderly parents—are more mobile than ever before, often moving hundred and thousands of miles away, maintaining the parent-child relationship primarily via telephone.

In Western Pennsylvania, these trends are especially powerful. Allegheny County, in fact, has one of the largest elderly populations, by numbers and percentage, in the country.

Nationally, we know that the age group 85 and older is the fastest growing population segment. In the Greater Pittsburgh area, people in this population are renowned for their tendency to stay put. Strong traditional, social, ethnic and religious values lead many of these physically frail and financially vulnerable individuals to live out their lives in the same neighborhoods and river communities where they were born and reared their families.

At the same time, economic and lifestyle factors are driving many of these people's children out of Pittsburgh—and out of reach for daily personal contact and direct help with managing residential, health care and financial responsibilities.

## **Enter the Professional Geriatric Care Manager**

A new professional discipline, the professional geriatric care manager, has evolved in response to all of these forces. On the healthcare front alone, many elderly individuals, who have become accustomed to comprehensive and generous health benefits derived from labor union-negotiated packages in the 1960s and 1970s, are baffled by managed care.

Concepts like a gatekeeper primary care physician, coupled with multiple care settings such as home care, out patient and skilled nursing, often are confusing to individuals who grew up using minimal health care and expecting simply to “go in the hospital” when they become seriously ill.

Not only is the healthcare paradigm confusing, the multitude of health benefit choices, wrap-around policies and other sophisticated financing instruments now on the market add to the difficulty many elderly people experience when attempting to manage their own affairs.

Extensively trained in social work, with additional specialized training in gerontology, professional geriatric care managers are paid providers who work for the geriatric client—not the provider institution—to coordinate and supervise health care, financial planning and other critical lifestyle decisions and processes on the client’s behalf.

Performing in a relatively new field, professional geriatric care managers work under the standards of practice developed by the 1,200-member National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers, based in Tucson, Arizona.

Typical services provided by geriatric care managers include assessment, consultation, selection and monitoring of appropriate home care services, linkage to community support and entitlement programs, nursing and personal home care placement, caregiver support and counseling.

Although geriatric care managers see themselves primarily as advocates and managers for their clients, they are partners with the client’s total care team—including physicians, other health professionals, lawyers, bankers, insurance agents and other individuals who impact the client’s life and quality of life.

## **Partnering with Seniors**

In the healthcare arena, the professional geriatric care manager is uniquely situated to be a partner with health professionals. Because they have a thorough understanding of our client’s circumstances, they can promote proper preventive care within the limits of their healthcare benefits. Because many clients are excessively deferential to physicians, geriatric care managers are able to speak up to the primary care physician on the client’s behalf when the client is more inclined to minimize or deny a health concern. Because they are immersed in the client’s total life situation, geriatric care managers are able to advise health professionals about the client’s particular and unique financial, residential, social and familial circumstances and resources.

If the client is prescribed medication, dietary restrictions, rehabilitative treatment or outpatient care, they can help assure compliance and timely attendance at scheduled appointments in order to maximize the therapeutic benefit.

Beyond the performance aspect of these activities, they have an important role in helping clients understand what is happening and why—so that they do not feel like they are lost in a complicated system or being impersonally “dealt with” by uncaring bureaucracy.

## Building Awareness

Currently, professional geriatric care managers divide their time between performing their professional duties and striving to build awareness of their capabilities among healthcare, financial and other professionals who may benefit from their participation in a client’s life.

They stress the cooperative, complementary nature of services. Geriatric care managers are not interested in second-guessing or obstructing the services and strategies provided by physicians and other health care providers. They are there to facilitate access to medical care and to ensure that patients follow their doctor’s care plan. To put it simply, they recognize that many elderly individuals bear a disproportionate share of healthcare difficulties and misunderstandings in today’s complex and fast-paced environment.

Geriatric care managers are there to see that patients receive the maximum benefit from their health care, while maintaining the highest possible quality of life.

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