

8 Myths About Home Care for the Elderly

When Carrie Miller's husband was hospitalized after a heart attack, his doctors recommended an in home care professional to help him get back on his feet. Several times a week, a physical therapist came into the home to improve her husband's mobility and a speech therapist arrived to work on some of the language skills he had temporarily lost.



Susan Ryan's mom didn't have major health problems, but as she aged, her arthritis was becoming more debilitating. She had lost some mobility, which made tasks like getting up the stairs, bathing and cooking more difficult. So Susan hired an agency to help out with duties such as cooking, bathing, light housekeeping and accompanying her mom shopping. For many families, this can be a godsend. But others worry about letting a stranger into the home. There is still much confusion and myths surrounding home care. Let's do some myth busting.

Myth No. 1: They don't care about their patients.

Reality: Miller admits that was a concern for her and her family, especially because she knew her husband wasn't at his best. "My concern was that they wouldn't care for him properly," she says. Dr. Michael Fleming, Chief Medical Officer for national home health care company, Amedisys, counters that concern by explaining that nurses, therapists and aides base their treatment on the person's individual needs. A professional will establish a rapport, make them feel at ease, understand their hesitations and make the experience as comfortable as possible. To accomplish this, the agency staff should analyze their needs before placing someone in the home to make sure the caregiver is prepared and suited to meet them. If you feel this is not the case, contact the agency immediately and request another employee, or look for another agency.

Myth No. 2: They steal from the elderly and/or abuse them.

Reality: Most of us have heard the stories about mistreated patients or those who were victims of theft. For those reasons, some people avoid using outside services entirely. Dr. Fleming believes the majority of those kinds of crimes are committed by unskilled, independent caregivers or sitters who are not hired thorough a reputable agency. That's why it's important to perform your own due diligence when hiring. Ask about criminal background checks on employees before hiring. Another protection is to make sure the

company is licensed and bonded, procedures which are required of all agencies that receive payment from Medicare. He also suggests that people ask an agency how it trains the home health care workers it employs and whether employees are certified. Ask if the agency provides a supervisor to evaluate the quality of care on a regular basis.

Myth No. 3: Hiring an Outside Professional is only for people who are very sick.

Reality: It's true that seniors at home who are very ill or recovering from a serious operation may seek the services of a nurse or other licensed medical professional. This type of care can cover a wide range of medical and therapeutic services, such as those needed for postoperative rehabilitation, wound care, mobility training, pain management or IV therapy or injections.

Nonmedical care is also available and a good option for those who just need some extra help and attention around the house. Nonmedical care often revolves around the activities of daily living (ADLs) such as eating, dressing, bathing, housework, driving and shopping. Depending on the situation, your parent may benefit from both types of services.

Myth No. 4: Only really old people need home care.

Reality: Although many people who utilize home health care are 65 years old or older, it can also be used for younger people who are recovering from an injury or dealing with a chronic illness.

Myth No. 5: I have no say about who comes into my parent's home.

Reality: Reputable agencies will try to match similar interests and personalities that connect with your parent. For instance, Home Instead Senior Care, an international agency makes every attempt to try to match workers with seniors who share the same hobbies and histories.

The agency needs to continue to work with you and your parent to find somebody who has the personality and skills that match what they need. Finding the right fit for an elder requires some up-front work on the agency's part, says Val Halamandaris, president of the National Association for Home Care & Hospice, a Washington, D.C.-based trade association. The agency staff should analyze your parent's needs before placing someone in the home to make sure they are prepared and suited to meet your parent's particular needs. If at any point you are unhappy, call the agency immediately. They should be willing and able to work with you to find a better fit for your parent.

Myth No. 6: The quality of care provided at home is inferior compared to other facilities.

Reality: In reputable agencies, the staff receives extensive training before they ever enter a person's home. Clinicians need to be very well versed since they're on their own inside a home. It's not uncommon to have advanced medical treatments such as

intravenous therapy and ventilator care to be done at home. To be certain that your parent will be well cared for, ask questions such as: Does the agency conduct training? What does it entail? Are they knowledgeable about elderly health conditions and certified in CPR?

Myth No. 7: My parent only needs help with basic hygiene, so we don't qualify.

Reality: However basic your needs, there should be no limit for a care provider to assist you. Be sure to find an agency that can provide the full range of care, from basic peer-level companionship and hygiene assistance to highly skilled nursing and therapy.

Myth No. 8: If I am their caregiver, there is no need for additional help.

Reality: According to the Harvard Medical School Family Health Guide, a caregiver, including a family member, should never be on-call 24 hours a day. People who are emotionally and physically exhausted or guilt-ridden cannot provide good care. Everyone needs respite and relief. A professional can provide you a break from the rigors of full-time care giving, without having to remove your loved one from familiar surroundings.

The simple fact is that most elders want to stay at home. With the older population increasing, learning about home health care is important and a solution worth considering, depending on your individual situation.

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