

ADVOCACY FACT SHEET 6

Dealing with Conflict

One of the biggest sources of stress for families of people with dementia is dealing with conflicts over health care. It is not easy for doctors and other health-care providers to treat people who are confused or upset and who cannot clearly explain what they need. Mistakes are made. And many patients and families feel like they're caught up in a system where there never seems to be enough time, money or staff to go around.

Two common sources of conflict are:

- Conflict over getting access to care - trying to get assistance or services for someone.
- Conflict over the delivery of health care, for instance the quality of care being received in a care facility.

Steps to Resolving Conflict

If you are in a conflict, here are some steps you can take:

1. Make sure you understand the whole situation. Ask questions and listen carefully to the answers. Get all the details before you take action. Conflicts are often based on misunderstandings or lack of communication.
2. Find out what the rules really are. Care facilities and hospitals are regulated, and it's important to understand what they are and aren't allowed to do.
3. Figure out who has the power to change the situation. A supervisor? The care facility manager?

4. Put your concerns in writing. Letters can be very useful in documenting and resolving problems. (See *Advocacy Fact Sheet 7: Writing an Effective Letter*.)
5. Humanize the concern. Without getting too emotional, make sure the person you are talking to (or writing to) understands the effects of the situation on the person with dementia and their family. For example:

Example Letter

Every day for fifty years, rain or shine, our father, Robert, has taken a walk. Since moving to Shady Glen Care Centre he has settled in very well. He particularly likes the large garden by the river. Most days he stays inside the Centre's grounds, but sometimes he decides to go for a long walk. Recently he got lost and was returned by the police.

The staff put a "wander guard" on Robert so he can't leave the building without a staff member or visitor to open the door. The last two times we visited he was extremely upset. He feels like a prisoner indoors and doesn't understand why he can't go out.

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This is one of 10 **Advocacy Fact Sheets** prepared by the Alzheimer Society of B.C. These fact sheets offer tips on advocating for a family member with dementia. We suggest you read through the series, and then use the resources provided to find more specific information.

We understand that Shady Glen is worried about Robert's safety, but this has made him terribly unhappy and is affecting his health. It is also very upsetting for the family (especially his grandchildren) to see him so distressed. We know that our father values his independence and his love of the outdoors more than being safe every minute.

6. Avoid arguing, but be persistent. This can be hard to do. Don't get pulled into an argument. Stay polite and respectful even when others don't.
7. Reward good behaviour and build common ground. When people are helpful, thank them. Remind them about points you have agreed on, and past successes. It's easier to move forward when you aren't completely focused on problems.
8. Prioritize. Be willing to compromise. When there are a lot of problems, decide what is most important. Giving ground on one issue may help you reach agreement on others.
9. Get help. If you can't resolve a problem, you may want to contact the Patient Care Quality office in your Health Region.

Tips for Dealing with Staff

Here are some things to think about when working with health-care providers:

- Most staff never knew residents before they had dementia. Tell them about your family member. It can be helpful to write up a little biography and leave it in their room. Photos

are also helpful, both for the person with dementia and for staff. In hospital, where staff are constantly changing, it can be useful to tape up a reminder, such as "John is very deaf. Please speak up."

The more staff know about the person they are caring for, the better they can do their job.

- Be sensitive to culture. In care facilities, there are men and women from all walks of life, with different religious beliefs, political views, personalities and backgrounds. Living in close quarters can cause friction. In addition, many staff are recent immigrants to Canada, and there can be misunderstandings based on cultural or language differences.
- Express your appreciation. You probably already know this: caregiving is very tough work. Staff often grow very close to the people they care for. There is little recognition or support for grieving in health-care jobs, and when their patients die, sometimes staff don't cope well.

Remember those small sentences that matter: "Thank you." "I'm sorry." "How can I help?"

RESOURCES

BC Centre for Elder Advocacy and Support
www.bcceas.ca 1-866-437-1940 (toll-free).

To complain about a patient care issue:
Patient Care Quality Offices

www.patientcarequalityreviewboard.ca
1-888-875-3256 (toll-free)

A Guide to Creating a Life Story for Care-giving:
www.interiorhealth.ca.

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