

# Home care support a healthy option for seniors and families

BY RON MCLEOD, SPECIAL TO THE SUN DECEMBER 15, 2009

There's no place like home. For most of us, our home is indeed our castle and tangible proof of our independence and self sustainability.

Unfortunately, there will come a time when a person we love can no longer get out of bed, get dressed or have a meal without assistance, and their ability to live in their own home will be jeopardized. As the level of care they need increases, so typically does the stress, anxiety and time demands experienced by the family member or friend providing care.

Too often, out of duty, guilt or love, family members and friends will bravely sacrifice their own routines and quality of life so their loved one can maintain theirs. Unaware of the excellent home care support available in B.C. or how to access it, too many people put themselves in hospital while trying to keep someone they love out of it.

There is a better way.

Across B.C. each year, everyday heroes like nurses and community health workers provide millions of hours of home care support, allowing seniors and British Columbians with physical and mental challenges to enjoy greater independence and quality of life in their own homes, while providing much needed respite to the family and friends that care for them.

The wide range of home support and personal care they provide includes medication reminders, blood sugar monitoring, tube feedings, bath assistance, catheter care, bowel care, wound care, lifts and transfers, as well as activities of daily living for mental health clients. Most of these services are covered by local health authorities.

In Vancouver, determining if you or your loved one is eligible for subsidized services begins with a call to Vancouver Community Central Intake (604-263-7377), which handles intake for home and community health services such as home support, nursing care, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and residential facilities.

A case manager from a local Community Health Unit, usually a nurse or social worker, will first visit to conduct an assessment. From there, the Health Authority will determine how much home care support can be provided and subsidized and a patient care plan will be developed.

If the client wants more services than the health unit authorized or would like someone to provide services that are not authorized by the health unit, that can also be arranged. Such services typically include cleaning, cooking, escorts to medical appointments, companionship. Typically, the health unit will only authorize cleaning services for mental health clients living in conditions that pose an increased risk to their health.

In Vancouver, home care support is delivered by one of five agencies assigned to specific regions of the city. For instance, if you live between Queen Elizabeth Park-Little Mountain and the PNE, chances are you would be served by us, the Greater Vancouver Community Services Society. Founded in 1971, our 300 community health workers and nurses currently provide 400,000 hours of home care support in Vancouver each year.

We would contact you to set up service times and schedules and then conduct an initial visit with you and/or your family so everyone can get a clear understanding of how the service will work. We would also provide a service manual that explains all the dos and don'ts of home support.

We believe a client's rapport with their health care worker is very important. As clients feel more comfortable when they can communicate their needs in their own language, we do try to match languages. Our community health workers currently speak Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Hindi, Vietnamese, Spanish, and Korean.

Since 1971, the quality of care delivered through home support has improved considerably across B.C. Today, we only hire community health workers with a provincially recognized certificate as a Resident Care Aide. In addition to interviews, safety training and reference and criminal records checks, our employees also undergo ongoing training in areas such as mental health, palliative care, or dementia care.

These days, community health workers arrive at a client's home wearing identification and carry devices outlining patient care plans, including any medication updates that were issued that day.

Our nursing and supervisory staff, train and supervise the workers on a regular basis and will visit clients if concerns arise.

While many aspects of home care support have changed over the past four decades, it's still delivered by some of the most caring, competent and dedicated people in the health care system. If you have any questions about home care support or how to access it, you can call us at 604-737-4900.

As the costs of caring for B.C.'s greying population eats up an ever increasing proportion of our provincial budget, it's more important than ever for British Columbians to take advantage of cost-effective options like home support that can keep seniors at home with their families and out of emergency wards and long-term care facilities.

Ron McLeod is the executive director of the Greater Vancouver Community Services Society.