

HELP program smoothes seniors' experience at SMH

NASSAWADOX – It happens all the time—a perfectly functional older adult experiences a fall or some other unfortunate happenstance and winds up in the hospital. Their physical needs are immediately addressed, but, somewhere along the line, they become disoriented as to place and time, and their sleep and eating routines become seriously disrupted. The medical term for this condition is “delirium” and it is the mission of Shore Memorial’s HELP (Hospital Elder Life Program) to intervene and prevent or reverse it.

Help Background

The HELP program is the brainchild of Dr. Sharon Inouye of the Yale University School of Medicine. Over the course of several years, Dr. Inouye developed screening methods to identify patients at risk for delirium within 24 to 48 hours of admission. Simple but effective therapies were developed that keep patients “connected,” reduce the stresses of the hospital environment and preserve patients’ level of independence. The goal was to shorten hospital stays and return patients home in good mental condition to forestall the need for readmissions.

Shore Memorial’s involvement with the program began in 2006 when Dr. Terris Kennedy, vice-president and Chief Nursing Officer at the hospital confirmed HELP’s suitability for a hospital such as SMH, with its large percentage of elderly patients. Community support provided financing to get the program under way—HELP at SMH received grants from United Way of Virginia’s Eastern Shore and from a benefit golf tournament sponsored by the Blarney Stone pub in Onancock. A donation from The Garden Club of the Eastern Shore of Virginia purchased the program’s educational and training materials.

With financing in place, staffing the program became the next order of business. Susan Nalls, a local registered nurse was chosen to head up the program, assisted by Licensed Practical Nurse Rae Crumb. The backbone of the program is a group of dedicated volunteers fondly known as “The Green Team” (for their uniform’s jacket color) who are specially trained to give the kind of hands-on contact that helps elderly patients and oriented to their surroundings. The first group of volunteers began training in February of 2008, and, as of July 1, Shore Memorial has a roster of 14. Nalls points out that many of the volunteers are, like her, members of the “sandwich generation” where the responsibilities of caring for

children and elderly parents often overlap. Gratitude for the kindness shown when their parents were in need has prompted them to respond by helping ease the burden for other families.

How HELP works:

Upon admission, all patients ages 70 and over are evaluated to see if they would benefit from HELP. Not only patients who exhibit signs of confusion are eligible, so are folks with poor vision or hearing and those with restricted mobility—all conditions that can lead to a loss of function during their hospital stay.

For starters, HELP volunteers visit their patients daily. They answer questions and set up a schedule of shared activities like reading and games that provide a home-like structure to hospital days. To enable their patients to get to sleep at night without sleep medications, the volunteers' "sandman" tricks include relaxing back rubs, soft music and calming beverages like herbal tea or warm milk. To regain strength and mobility, patients need a nutritious diet and regular exercise, and the Green Team is right there to provide motivation, companionship and a little HELP toward gaining independence. Even after discharge, HELP stays involved, making follow-up calls to track patients' success in making the transition to home or other care.

HELP for the future:

Shore Memorial is proud to have been accepted for this ongoing affiliation with Yale University. SMH's inclusion as a data-collection site for their research enables the hospital both to make a contribution to this scientific study and to benefit from fine-tuning the program undergoes as it matures and becomes more widespread in the medical community.

Dr. Robert Paschall, DO., a member of the SMH active staff who frequently sees elderly patients with cognitive impairments, calls the HELP program "an exceptional resource for the hospital." It was Paschall who coined the phrase "Green Team" to refer to the volunteers in their "notoriously sharp" uniforms. After just a few months of HELP intervention, he reports that his "patients are happy to find a new friend in the hospital, the nurses find them easier to work with, and they are frequently discharged much earlier because of the reality-oriented effects of their friends on the 'Green Team'."

For more information about the HELP program and about volunteering at Shore Memorial, call Susan Nalls at 414-8874.