

Essential Role of Caregivers Better Understood

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Caring for elderly parents, spouses and relatives can be challenging and exhausting for many people. The model of healthcare is changing to one in which seniors are choosing to age in place, foregoing care centres and residences in favor of care in their own homes. While the desire to remain in familiar and loved places is certainly understandable, meeting both the day-to-day needs of a senior – never mind those that arise in an emergency situation – can be a significant challenge for many caregivers.

The good news for those who are fulfilling this role is that there are many excellent resources that can provide excellent information and support on the journey. Although the experience of caregiving can often be isolating, healthcare providers are in a unique position to observe the family dynamics and to help caregivers access the kind of information they need about coping with difficult situations, avoiding burnout and providing the best care possible to their loved ones.

In April 2014, a conference was held in Edmonton entitled, *Supporting Family Caregivers of Seniors: Improving Care and Caregiver Outcomes* (hereafter referred to as Caregiver Conference). As a result of that gathering, a toolkit has been created that will assist healthcare providers guide caregivers to sources of information and support most relevant to their particular situations.

The Discovery Toolkit consists of five parts, reflecting the main themes of the Caregiver Conference which include supporting caregivers of seniors with complex needs; understanding the caregiver experience; online support for caregivers; supporting caregivers in end of life care; and resources and research.

“Family members need to be engaged as true partners in care and decision-makers,” says Dr. Jasneet Parmar, editor and project lead. “It is our hope that the information in the toolkit will advance knowledge, understanding, programming and supports in the area of caregiver support for family caregivers, healthcare professionals, those training for a career in healthcare, researchers and policy-makers alike. “

The toolkit is the result of a collaborative effort amongst the Caregiver Study Group; the Department of Family Medicine (University of Alberta); the Network of Excellence in Seniors' Health and Wellness, Covenant Health; Covenant Health Research Centre; Alberta Health Services – Seniors Health Strategical Clinical Network; Alzheimer Society – Alberta and NWT; and Caregivers Alberta.