

Mail Today

Many of us who are hard-pressed for time find the presence of home care givers comforting



BY MANU MOUDGIL

WHAT DO you do if your ageing mother has fallen, is hospitalised with a broken hip and needs someone by her side help her move around and eat? You may be the only person in the family with space in the house for her or the means needed to provide her care. But the fact remains that you don't have the capacity to actually provide the hands-on care she needs, since your job takes all your time and energy. What will you do?

Rashmi Gupta, a 45-year-old housewife, was not short of compassion for her father-in-law who suffered from brain haemorrhage, but couldn't handle looking after his hygiene, food and most importantly lack of company. "I have to look after the needs of my family, which includes two children, and my husband is also busy in office all day. Caring for my father in law all by myself was not possible," she confesses.

HOME CARE IS THE BEST

Extended stays in nursing homes are neither financially feasible or possible for families. So people today are opting for home care for their parents or other family members in need. According to Simrita Chaudhry, coordinator of geriatric care workers training programme with VIMHANS, "The demand for caregivers has risen by 30 per cent over the past 12 years." It was VIMHANS that provided Anita, a caregiver trained by them, to look after Rashmi's father-in-law. Besides taking care of the patient's hygiene, she helped him do exercises recommended by the physiotherapist and fed him all his meals. Offering him companionship and hope during this arduous period was an important part of her job.

A DIVERSE ROLE

Home caregivers are a separate cadre of people, and can't be seen as replacements for either domestics or nurses. Their role is primarily to provide care for the patient and enable family members to live more comfortably. Since they are trained in hospital settings, the caregivers can perform several functions, including tubal feeding, spounging and catheter change besides



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— L viveen Anand, Head- Home Care Business, Max Healthcare

THAT CARING PRESENCE

doing simple dressings, preventing bed sores and using basic medical equipment. "Some of their functions do overlap with nurses and that's why we introduce them to basic concepts of physiology, mental health, psychology as well as dietetics so that they can prepare special feeds, if needed, for patients. They are not trained to administer injections or to give drips though," explains Simrita.

COMPASSION IS CRUCIAL

Caregivers spend a significant amount of their training period in affiliated hospitals, which helps them get used to the hard job of handling patients. "Compassion, empathy and respect for time are essential qualities in any caregiver. They learn all this while working in hospitals under the supervision of professionals. In fact, they need to be emotionally stronger and more mature than nurses since they are with terminally-ill patients a lot of the time," says L viveen Anand, the head of home care business with Max Healthcare.

Mr Kushalpal Singh, who has used the services of home caregivers to help him care for his elderly parents for eight years, believes the communication skills of the caregiver are important. "I have had caregivers first for my mother who was suffering from Alzheimer's and more recently for my father. Some had the interest and capacity to get old people to talk and eat while others weren't all that bothered. It all depends upon their dedication and persistence and how well the person being looked after is responding to them," he adds. Many of the caregivers develop special relationships with patients and their families.

THE DARK SIDE OF THE STORY

But the things are not always rosy. Patients and families both can be tough nuts to crack. Ram Iqbal, a 25-year-old caregiver who has been in the field for last 10 years, confesses there have been instances when patients have thrown him

out of their homes. "It generally happens with Alzheimer patients who are forgetful. We have to exercise patience when our patients say bad things but that's part of the job because they also reciprocate our love when in good mood," he declares.

Surviving difficult relationships and hard times can be tough. Nargis, a 35-year-old caregiver, feels patience is the god's gift that has seen her survive in this profession for so long. "We were 42 girls in our batch, but only 20 survived. I deal with patients by considering them as children who are upset with life. They behave like children a lot of the time but actually only want love which sometimes the family is unable to give," she says.

L viveen Anand says that caregivers are provided emergency numbers to report abuse. "Sometimes the family can be very fussy. Some even want caregivers to carry their own food and tea, but we try to reach a compromise so that both parties are happy." Consensus must be reached about the guidelines to be agreed upon. "We tell the families that caregivers are trained professionals and should be treated likewise. While their job is to make the patient comfortable, this doesn't include household work," she says.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Besides VIMHANS and latest entrant Max Healthcare, there are no other big names providing home care. This has led to various nursing agencies filling the demand-supply gap. While Max Healthcare gets consent forms signed by the clients, VIMHANS only issues guidelines on services on offer and adherence to timings of the service. However, private agencies neither execute agreements nor issue guidelines. "We give briefings to the staff on what is expected from them and they perform well. We seldom receive complaints of not meeting the expectations," says Jessy Prem of Jyoti Nursing Bureau. Verification of the caregivers is done by all of them, but this does not mean that staff is equally adept at handling the patients.

As in nursing, the home care sector is also dominated by women. "In a batch of 15 candidates, we get only two men even though the demand for both is equal. We ask families to either wait or accept female caregivers," says Simrita. Meenakshi Kapoor of Esha Placements agrees. "We don't send female caregivers to care for men but if the families are in dire need, they agree to have women," she adds. The service charges vary with agencies. The caregivers are available for 12-hour or 24-hour shift depending upon need of the patient. While 24-hour service from VIMHANS may go up to Rs 275 per day, Max Healthcare charges Rs 1,000 and private agencies take from Rs 500 to Rs 600.

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