

## Team helps family see bigger picture in father's failing health

By ANGELA MOMBOURQUETTE | DON'T GET ME STARTED  
Mon, Apr 4 - 4:54 AM

WHEN Dianne Chalmers contacted me to talk about her family's experience with Capital Health's PATH (Palliative and Therapeutic Harmonization) program, I had to admit I had never heard of it. After hearing Chalmers' story, I wished the program had been in existence in the last few years of my mother's life — we all would have benefited greatly from it.

Chalmers and her sister, Sharon MacKenzie, are the primary caregivers for their aging parents. They all live together, and, while both parents are frail, her father has a number of serious health issues.

"For the past two years, he has not been able to get out of the house at all unless we call an ambulance, so he has been completely housebound," she told me. Chalmers was becoming increasingly frustrated with her attempts to get a physician to come to see him.

She had heard there was a program designed to help the frail elderly and their families understand their current health status and make decisions about future care, and requested a referral from her father's family doctor. Since Chalmers was unable to bring her father to them, geriatrician Dr. Laurie Mallery and nurse practitioner Sandra Duke came, without hesitation, to Chalmers' home.

"Before they came, they had gone through his chart so they were up on all his health issues and his hospitalizations. They spent an hour in the living room with Dad and the family, asking questions," Chalmers told me. "The nurse practitioner did a physical. Then Dr. Mallery said, 'The next part of this is where I'm going to give you information on his existing health status, so we are clear on what his issues are. And after that,' he said, 'we are going to talk about what are the likely outcomes of these health issues, and what decisions you might want to make based on what those outcomes could be.'"

Some of the information the family heard was, Chalmers admitted, a bit hard to take, because they hadn't been entirely aware of the full implications of some of her father's health issues.

"We talked a great deal about thinking twice before we make decisions about transfusion, surgeries, resuscitation, the gamut," said Chalmers. She said Dr. Mallery pointed out that each healthcare decision was an opportunity "not only to try to fix him, but also, to let him go. And I loved the way she put that."

The PATH assessment had finally brought all of her father's health issues into context as elements of a bigger picture. "We finally got someone to go over everything from head to toe," said Chalmers.

"It took three hours, and when we finished, there was an unbelievable collective sigh of relief from the family.

"Dad had been going for X-rays every six months and going down to the hospital to have ultrasounds, and we'd heard the same news time and time again: 'Yes it's getting more serious, but, no, we can't operate.' So now we've decided — no more tests, because what are we going to do with that information?"

Not an easy reality to face up to, for sure. "There were moments when it hit you in the stomach," she admitted, "But one of the things Dr. Mallery tried to find out at the very beginning was how interested we were in prolonging his life, versus giving him quality of life. And we all agreed that it was the quality.

"It was an extremely positive experience. I wish it upon anybody that's going through this."

I'm with her on that.

Next week: the dedicated doctors behind PATH.

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