When Diagnosis is Just the Beginning

Introduction

Providing appropriate and effective medical care is important but may not be enough. Often a patient does not share with you the numerous life issues that will have an impact on their response to the care you give.

There can be many obstacles for a patient who needs treatment. Unless the physician is aware of these life issues a patient faces, the medical care may be ineffective. Therefore, those in the healing profession need some knowledge of the types of social and legal issues patients face. Additionally, knowing the legal rights patients possess, will help the physician identify when a patients rights are violated and thus can appropriately refer the patient.

Utilizing a multi-disciplinary approach allows the physician to see the patient as a “whole person”. Often, cancer patients will say that the cancer “is the least of my problems” as they face financial problems, child placement decisions, matrimonial difficulties and insurance company disputes. The problems arise at a time when the patient should be focusing on their condition and what steps they need for recovery. Providing the medical profession with an overview of the various issues, problems and solutions will assist the physician to effectively treat patients with serious illnesses.

Objectives

At the conclusion of this unit you will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the legal and social needs of patients with serious illnesses.
2. Explain how physicians and other providers interface with insurers to extend care to a patient.
3. Identify issues involving patient care beyond the treatment plan.
4. Explore the roles of various social agencies that assist patients.
5. Demonstrate in section through discussion of problems patients face beyond the diagnosis and how that will affect their response to treatment.

Preparation

1. Read the Case of Deidre Ryan.
2. Use the readings to identify why cancer patients may need legal services.
3. Use the readings to identify what patients expect their physicians to know about advocacy.
4. Use your own life experiences and belief system to relate to the difficult decisions the patient in the case study will face.

Process

1. Class today begins in lecture. Denise Snow, JD, RN, a practicing attorney who provides legal assistance to cancer patients, will discuss legal advocacy. We will also have the opportunity to have a conversation with one or more patients.
2. Following the presentation, we will adjourn to section and you should be prepared to envision how you see your role as physician. Is there importance and value to caring for your patients with a holistic approach? Will you be able to discuss the difficult discussions of future planning with individuals with serious illnesses? How important is listening to patients? How well do you think you listen?

3. As a group try to list and explain how Deidre’s physicians might have better assisted her.

Study Questions

1. Briefly discuss the various issues in Deidre’s life at the time she first began having symptoms.
2. Is there anything Deidre can do to obtain child care services now that she is no longer working?
3. How can the physician assist patients in getting benefits?
4. How can the physician assist the patient with insurance denials?
5. How will the financial problems Deidre faces affect her care, if at all?
6. When should Deidre consider appointing a guardian for her children? Can you assist her with this decision?

Articles on File

1. APC: Medical Legal Needs of Cancer Patients Cited
2. The Bleeding Edge
3. Your Master Card or Your Life
4. Craig’s List Appeal (Actual patient appeal for assistance as found on a popular website.
5. Health Care Proxy
6. Living Will
7. Power of Attorney

Resource Links