



Technology and Wellness

Joan Horvath

Activities for Living Well are experiences that enrich the spirit and provide meaning and substance to residents' lives. Much of what we know about maintaining wellness at any age involves the importance of community and communications. The camaraderie provided by the shared experience of other residents in assisted living (AL) facilities offers opportunities for peer-to-peer relationships but frequently lacks the substance and depth garnered by lifelong relationships with friends and family. In many cases, a resident's physical limitations combined with geographic obstacles mean that family visits are few and far between. Some residents see family only for short visits on holidays and special occasions. Even in the best of circumstances when family and friends live nearby, family visits must be coordinated to meet everyone's schedules.

VIRTUAL VISITING

Some communities, however, have implemented a new high-tech initiative that enables residents to enjoy real-time, Web-based video visits with family and friends anywhere in the world. Wesley Enhanced Living (WEL) recently installed Virtual Visiting Centers in its Hatboro and Doylestown, PA, communities. Family Virtual Visits (FVV) offers a turnkey system that automatically begins the virtual visit for the residents. For both residents and staff, the solution eliminates any stress or hesitancy about operating high-tech equipment and makes it easy and fun for residents to focus exclusively on the visit itself.

In a small and cozy alcove, at the end of a hallway in the Heritage Towers in Doylestown, PA, a large-screen digital video television, digital video camera, speakers, and echo-cancelling microphones positioned in front of a seating area appears to be nothing more than another television viewing area. In fact, the interface has been engineered to be "just like watching TV" because there is no keyboard or mouse and there is no appearance of any technology beyond the TV screen. When activated, however, the Virtual Visiting Center becomes a live, interactive visit with family members or friends. Residents work with staff to schedule appointments online for the service that allows them to become

part of a child's birthday celebration, see and talk with a grandchild dressed and ready for the prom, or just spend a few minutes on a regular basis with family and friends.

Appointments must be coordinated with family and friends. To engage in a visit, family and friends must have a PC, a high-speed Internet connection, a Webcam, and a microphone. At WEL, to encourage widespread use of the system, virtual visit services are being offered to residents free of charge. Family members sign up for the service via the FVV Web site. Appointments are made through a proprietary scheduling system during Virtual Visiting hours that are set by the AL facility. By attending the well-received program tutorial and demonstration at Heritage Towers, residents became eligible to win a free Webcam kit to enable family and friends to participate. Because the system is Web-based, as long as there is high-speed Internet access, visits are possibly anywhere in the world.

At the appointed time, the family member logs into the Web site to connect. The resident just needs to be sitting in front of the monitor and the Virtual Visit begins and ends automatically.

Recently a resident at WEL at Maple Village community (located in Hatboro) used the program to speak with her



Walt Weber and Joanne DeCew participate in a Family Virtual Visit at Heritage Towers in Doylestown, PA.

spouse, who is a resident in Heritage Tower's skilled nursing program. A FVV spokesperson states that this is the first time that 2 residents in different communities have used the program to speak to one another.

FVV will install and maintain state-of-the-art video connection equipment in your facility. Contact them at 415-883-3500 or Sales@familyvirtualvisits.com.

OPENING THE HEALTH PORTALS OF THE WEB FOR RESIDENTS

The Internet offers opportunities for seniors well beyond the basics of forwarding E-mails with animated smiling faces. The Internet can provide engaging, meaningful activity for residents by helping them to take control of their personal health and wellness through programs and systems available online.

Web sites offering health and wellness information proliferate. In fact, the Internet is the most popular resource for health and wellness information. The Pew Internet & American Life Project reports that 80% of American Internet users have searched for information on at least 1 of 17 health topics included in the Pew Internet study. When looking for health information online, most Internet users start with a search engine. Very few, however, check the source and date of the information they find.

Health and wellness Web sites like WebMD.com, YahooHealth.com, and Health.com allow users to search for information by disease and have sections devoted to healthy eating, exercise, and health conditions specific to men, women, and children. What these sites lack, however, is information that is specific to older adults and frail elderly persons.

According to *Retooling for an Aging America: Building the Health Care Workforce*, the recently released report from the Institute of Medicine's (IOM) Committee of the Future Health Care Workforce for older Americans, many older adults (65 and older) experience one or more geriatric syndromes—clinical conditions that do not fit into discrete disease categories (ie, depression and anxiety). The report states that whether or not the current patterns of health status and utilization continue, one prediction is certain: the future elderly population will have a greater collective need for healthcare services than those who have come before it.

Chronic diseases exact a particularly heavy health and economic burden on older adults because of associated long-term illness, diminished quality of life, and greatly increased healthcare costs. Although the risk of disease and disability increases with age, poor health is not an inevitable consequence of aging.

According to the IOM report, besides being inadequately prepared in geriatrics, the current healthcare workforce is not large enough to meet older patients' needs. Older adults account for about one-third of visits

to physician assistants (PAs), but less than 1% of PAs specialize in geriatrics, and less than 1% of pharmacists and registered nurses are certified in geriatrics.

Much of the illness, disability, and death associated with chronic disease are avoidable through known prevention measures. Key measures include practicing a healthy lifestyle that includes regular physical activity, healthy eating, avoiding tobacco, and the use of early detection practices (eg, screening for breast, cervical, and colorectal cancers; diabetes and its complications; and depression). Helping residents to take charge of their own health and access and monitor their own wellness can improve their overall wellness.

A newly launched Web site (www.NueLife.com) is dedicated to helping older adults stay healthy and vital after age 55. The site contains interactive quizzes on conditions common among seniors. Tools and tip sheets help seniors track blood pressure, medications, cholesterol levels, blood sugar levels, and weight. By registering on the site (an option), seniors can then use the tools to save their personal health information for future reference and updating. In fact, forms can be printed and taken to a physician's office. Tip sheets are designed to encourage questions and dialogue with physicians and pharmacists concerning conditions, medications and drug interactions, and medical tests.

The Web site also contains health-risk assessment evaluations for conditions that are common among older adults—osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, glaucoma, urinary incontinence, and COPD, for example. Developed specifically for older adults, the site limits blinking, distracting action items and instead features visual markers such as a red thermometer-like line on the top of the Health Risk Assessment screen. The line increases in length in proportion to each individual's health risk related to a condition.

Trying to teach reluctant seniors how to use the Web, without offering them a reason for using it presents a challenge. Sites like www.NueLife.com make learning to navigate the Web easier for older adults. It's a simple site that contains information specifically designed for this age group. The broad array of health and wellness information may suit the casual visitor, whereas those who are more interested can register to keep and track some of their own personal health information. Incorporating www.NueLife.com into routine Internet access lessons can help residents learn to use the Internet while they learn how to stay healthy and vital.

AJC

Joan Horvath is Editorial Director for HealthCom Media, Doylestown, PA.