One Day at a Time: Giving Hope Through Patient and Caregiver Support Groups at a Long-Term Acute Care Hospital

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Purpose: Long term acute care hospitals (LTACHs) provide complex medical care to patients who are critically ill and require medical treatment beyond the scope of a short-stay acute care hospital. Patients admitted are often described as "chronically critically ill", and have survived an initial episode of critical illness, but remain dependent on intensive care measures. Caregivers of this population can be prone to depression, grief, fatigue, and changes in social relationships that can impact physical health. Caregiver and patient support groups have been successfully implemented at our facility with various diagnoses including stroke, spinal cord injury and amputation. The purpose of this report is to describe the implementation of an interdisciplinary patient and caregiver support group at an LTACH and describe the outcomes.

Description: The Patient and Caregiver Support Groups were initiated at a thirty-eight bed LTACH located in an urban setting. The facilitators included a Case Manager, Chaplain, Occupational Therapist and Physical Therapist. The Caregiver Support Group was created for any caregiver/family member and is held every first Thursday of the month. The Patient Support Group is held the last Thursday of each month. Patients who attend are medically stable, non-vented and can tolerate being in a chair for at least one hour. The facilitators for the group use theme guided questions to initiate discussion between attendees. Discussions in both groups are tailored to focus on personal experiences, coping strategies, grief progression, and role changes within the family dynamic. Combined Patient and Caregiver Support Groups are held quarterly, where a former patient and caregiver are invited back to share their story. During these meetings, patients and their families are brought together to hear these stories and share their experiences in a supportive environment.

Summary of Use: The caregiver support group was implemented to reduce caregiver burden, improve psychological well-being, and foster a bond amongst caregivers on the unit. The patient support group’s goal was to increase a sense of community, enhance mood, reduce anxiety, and enhance participation in care. Participants are surveyed to assess the potential impact. The support groups were initiated in June 2014, with approximately 15 support groups held, inclusive of combined support groups. On average, there are 6 participants in the patient
support groups and 4 participants in the caregiver support groups monthly. The groups have created an encouraging environment, where the patients and caregivers are in a sense of uncertainty due to medical and functional status.

**Importance to Members:** This report describes the development and implementation of an interdisciplinary caregiver and patient support group for the chronically critically ill patient population receiving care in an LTACH. This group not only supported the patients and caregivers, but also allowed for improved communication and bonding between caregivers on the unit, thus impacting participation in care.