



MEDICAL IN TOUCH

A PUBLICATION OF HOSPICE OF THE VALLEY FOR THE MEDICAL COMMUNITY

Palliative Care for Dementia supports physicians, patients and family caregivers



Richard Yavitt with social worker Amy Chengalaram

RICHARD AND BARBARA YAVITT have been married 59 years. He took care of her through brain surgery and two kinds of cancer. Now she's caring for him at home through the advancing stages of Alzheimer's disease.

The disease was first diagnosed when Richard was in his late 70s by Scottsdale internist Jay Friedman, MD.

"I got a call from Dr. Friedman saying Richard did not know his age and he could not answer all the questions at his physical," Barbara recalled. "Dr. Friedman said from now on I must come to the office with Richard. So I did. But I was in chemo and radiation. It was hard."

The Yavitts aren't alone. Many of Friedman's elderly patients are symptomatic for dementia and their family caregivers are overwhelmed. When Friedman learned of Hospice of the Valley's Palliative Care for Dementia program, he was delighted there was a unique service to offer distressed families.

"These families are desperate for some sort of coherent program that can give them an idea of what to expect, what they can do now and in the future, and begin to plan for the natural progression,"

Friedman said. "Hospice of the Valley's Palliative Care for Dementia program is a lifesaver for these families. It has been repeatedly for every family I have sent."

Barbara Yavitt credits dementia educator Amy Chengalaram, a social worker, with teaching her how to calm herself so she can calm Richard, now 85. Barbara also has utilized the 24/7 phone line to talk to a nurse or social worker about urgent situations—like the time Richard got in the car alone and just kept driving, and the time he left the house on foot and just kept walking.

"They helped me be a better caregiver," Barbara said. "Although I wasn't perfect. I could get upset. I had to learn what was best to do. I used the phone service to call at all times of the day and night, and I was helped. It's working out."

Barbara also values volunteers who stay with Richard so she can leave the house for doctor's appointments and errand running. One volunteer even sat at Richard's bedside in the hospital over the holidays so Barbara could go home to host a dinner for some 30 people.

A mindfulness class Barbara took from program director Gillian Hamilton, MD, also helped ease stress.

Friedman said the Palliative Care for Dementia program helps him be a better physician. "It is absolutely what the doctor ordered," he said. "I need eyes in the home and feet on the ground to help assess the family and then get back with me. I can do a better job if I have collaborators."

Palliative Care for Dementia costs the patient/family \$275 a month. It is not covered by Medicare or insurance. For more information, call 602.636.6363, view hov.org/palliative-care-dementia or email DementiaCare@azphc.org. ❖

FALL 2015

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