Certified Nursing Assistants: A Key to Resident Quality of Life

John E. Morley MB, BCh *

Division of Geriatric Medicine, Saint Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO

The lead editorial this month is by a nursing home resident who draws attention to the importance of certified nursing assistants (CNAs) in enhancing quality of life in nursing home residents. The Journal recently had an article by Lerner et al confirming this. They found that high CNA turnover resulted in large numbers of deficiencies for quality of care and resident behavior. Burack et al used the Quality of Life Scales for Nursing Home Residents to demonstrate that the key quality-of-life issues for residents were dignity, spiritual well-being, and food enjoyment. CNAs play a key role in maintaining the functional ability of residents. The International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG) has placed quality-of-life improvement as a key need for nursing homes around the world. The research needs for nursing homes as identified by an IAGG survey focused on many areas that will lead to enhanced quality of life. It is clear that improving quality of life as opposed to medical care in nursing homes is highly dependent on CNAs. In many parts of the world this is recognized by the fact that nursing homes follow either a nursing or social model, rather than a medical model.

Factors shown to improve CNA job satisfaction among CNAs include sufficient time to undertake their tasks, appropriate communication from supervisors, and a feeling of being valued. Similarly, in end-of-life care, better staff communication among CNAs leads to better end-of-life care. Another study found that the supervisor approach is the key factor to producing satisfaction and commitment among CNAs. The author concluded that “When the workplace adds quality to the life of caregivers, the caregivers add quality to the life of residents.” Supportive supervision is a major predictor of job satisfaction in CNAs. CNAs require both a clear description of the tasks they need to perform, as well as autonomy in how they do this to maintain job satisfaction. Appropriate training leads to an increase in CNA’s performance and a decrease in burnout. Nursing home leadership needs to involve all staff if they are going to make a significant improvement in quality of care.

There are a number of areas in which CNAs clearly play a major role in enhancing quality of life. Overwhelmingly, there is a need for CNAs to have time to have one-to-one communication with the resident. CNAs also play a key role in allowing residents choices in their lives. Appropriate choices include when to get up in the morning, when to get dressed and what to wear, incontinence care, and where to dine. CNAs play a central role in creating meaningful activity programs in nursing homes. These can include cognition stimulation therapy, exercise programs, reminiscence therapy, spiritual activities, and interactive music therapy. Improving oral care in nursing homes is another area that falls to the CNAs.

Lack of enjoyment of food and resulting weight loss represent an important quality-of-life issue in nursing home residents. CNAs can enhance food intake by increasing intake of finger foods and caloric and protein supplements between meals. CNAs also play a key role in the early recognition of dehydration and its prevention.

Patient safety and falls is another area in which CNAs play an important role in improving care. There needs to be increased education on potentially preventable causes. Also the fact that physical restraints increased injurious falls and are considered resident abuse needs to be stressed.

CNAs have to deal consistently with residents with difficult behaviors. CNAs are consistently verbally and in some cases physically abused. CNAs need to be educated about the reasons why psychotropic drugs are dangerous and rarely improve a resident’s behavior. Behavioral modifications are poorly taught to CNAs and availability of alternatives, such as Snoezelen rooms, rarely exist in nursing homes. CNAs need to be aware of the importance of exercise for reducing problematic behaviors.

The new MDS 3.0 represents an important tool for CNAs to be aware of resident preferences. Especially important are the tools for recognizing depression and delirium. Depression is a major cause of poor quality of life in nursing homes. It is particularly important during the transition period when a person first enters the nursing home. The major treatments for dysphoria are activities, exercise, and behavioral therapy, not drugs. CNAs also are in the best position to recognize when pain is being inadequately treated.

The INTERACT program is becoming a major advance in helping to educate CNAs to recognize changes in a resident’s condition and in encouraging reporting of these changes. The “Stop and Watch Early Warning Tool” is an excellent tool to help CNAs recognize and report meaningful clinical changes in residents.

The importance of CNAs to the quality of life of residents cannot be understated. Being a CNA is extremely hard work with enormous emotional strain. With the advent of technological advances, some of the physical hardship will be lessened. Hopefully, this will allow the CNA more time to concentrate on carer tasks that are more important to quality of life. To allow CNAs to function appropriately, there is a need to improve their education and most importantly to reimburse them commensurate with the difficulty of the work.

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* Address correspondence to John E. Morley, MB, BCh, Division of Geriatric Medicine, Saint Louis University School of Medicine, 1402 S. Grand Boulevard, M238, St. Louis, MO 63104.

E-mail address: morley@slu.edu (J.E. Morley).

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As importantly, all of us (residents, supervisors, and physicians) need to recognize the heroic task CNAs perform and consistently thank and recognize their core role on the nursing home team.

References