

ADVANCE FOR NURSES

Supporting the Patient in Dialysis

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By Sandy Keefe, MSN, RN

Dialysis patients who have inadequate social support from family or friends are more likely to ignore recommendations from their healthcare providers, experience a lower quality of life and die earlier than patients with better support, according to a new large-scale study from French nephrology experts (Untas, A., et al., October 2010, *Clinical Journal of the American Society Nephrology*).

The research findings make good sense to Patti Davis, RN, CNN, peritoneal dialysis coordinator for the Schwartz Kidney Dialysis Center at St. Mary's Medical Center, West Palm Beach, FL. "I can definitely say that patients with good support systems, whether it's family, friends or even other patients, tend to feel better throughout their course of dialysis," she explained. "Our hemodialysis patients come in on a set schedule, so they see the same individuals each session and may even ride to the center together."

Family members also have the opportunity to create strong supportive bonds. "When they sit in the waiting room during dialysis treatments, they start talking about what it's like to care for someone with kidney problems and they share tips," said Davis. "Sometimes they'll run errands together while their loved ones are being dialyzed."

The dialysis team at St. Mary's provides a wealth of resources for social support. "We have a wide variety of patients, from younger people with children to adults in their 80s," Davis explained. "Our social worker, dietitian, nurses and dialysis techs establish close relationships so people do talk with us about their issues. Our social worker can make referrals to patients who need food stamps, housing, travel arrangements, insurance coverage or interventions for psychological problems."

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Davis encourages her patients to join one of the two support groups in Palm Beach County. "These groups give patients a chance to talk with one another - no one understands the meaning of hemodialysis like someone who's undergoing the same treatment," she said. "Group members talk about what they're going through, describe coping mechanisms to get past the tough points and encourage those who aren't doing so well."

Spouses, grown children and friends often accompany patients to the group sessions, gaining some insight into what it's like to deal with chronic renal failure. "Many patients have established sound and lasting friendships in that setting," Davis remarked.

Extension of the Home

"When you look at a dialysis center, you have to realize it's an extension of the patient's home," said Maribeth Sommer, MBA, RN, CNN, senior director of clinical services for the Avanti Group of DaVita offices, serving the Northeast from New Hampshire to Washington, DC, and northern Virginia. "Once patients begin dialyzing and establish relationships with caregivers, they don't ever want to leave."

Sommer described the unique bonds that form between chronic dialysis patients and the nurses who treat them every other day, or even more often. "Patients talk about their families, their lives and the issues they face every day, and our nurses are there to listen," she said. "Some of our facilities run patient support groups either immediately after a dialysis session or on the weekend."

Support groups give patients the opportunity to ask questions and share common concerns.

"Group members can involve staff like our nurses, dietitians or social workers, and they can also learn a great deal by networking with one another," said Sommer. "If one person doesn't think to ask a particular question, chances are someone else will bring it up."

DaVita dialysis centers incorporate greeters to welcome people as they enter the lobby.

"These greeters may be patients, family members or significant others who are comfortable interacting and facilitating conversations," said Sommer. "They'll bring out coffee or tea if that's acceptable on the patient's diet, introduce patients and visitors to one another, help them establish friendships and encourage them to share stories while they're waiting for dialysis." Social workers and dietitians may come out to the lobby to chat, answer questions or start lobby games that help pass the time. "They'll also start bingo games in the treatment areas as well, and patients really get excited about joining in when they see others winning," said Sommer.

Patients are free to interact with one another during dialysis treatments, forming close bonds that make them feel they're part of the greater whole. "Over the course of weeks or years, they enjoy those conversations with other dialysis patients who can truly relate to what they're going through with their kidney disorders," said Sommer.

Family members typically wait in the lobby during the initiation and termination of dialysis treatments, so they have the opportunity to form friendships as well. "They ask each other questions, consult with the dietitian or social workers, share stories back and forth, and talk about diet and other lifestyle issues associated with dialysis," said Sommer. "They're also welcome to join the patient during dialysis if that's the best option for the patient."

"Our CEO, Kent Thiry, regularly refers to DaVita as a community first and a company second," she noted. "And, at each of our facilities, we also have a Wall of Fame, which is displayed in a prominent location in the facility and posts pictures and fun facts about our patients and caregivers, so they can get to know each other better."

Sandy Keefe is a frequent contributor to ADVANCE.

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