

# Maintaining Independence with the help of Home Medical Technology

by Hanni Epp, MA

**“My Mom has been diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease and is living alone in her home. Lately, I’ve noticed some changes in her behavior, and I wonder if she is taking her medicine all the time. I also worry about her falling, as she has some difficulty walking at times. Do you think it’s safe for her to be living alone anymore?” Jean O.**

## **About Jean . . .**

Jean is widowed, and lives in a town 50 miles from her mother. She has taken responsibility for monitoring her mother’s care, and is concerned about providing a safe environment. Her mother is a very independent person, and wishes to stay in her own home. Jean’s siblings tell her not to worry so much, but because they all live farther away than she, they don’t notice the changes in their Mom as Jean does. They don’t see that Mom sometimes has a lot of trouble getting up, and frequently she can’t seem to get her legs moving in the right direction, causing her to stumble. Mom’s moods tend to be more unpredictable these days, too, a big change from the past. Although the others don’t see a problem, they are willing to listen to any ideas that Jean can come up with that will keep Mom safely in her home.

## **What Are the Issues?**

1. Mom lives alone. She is determined to stay in her home as long as possible and will not discuss moving into an assisted living facility. Mom

- fears that moving to such a facility will mean giving up everything that is familiar to her and having “strangers” tell her what to do, and when to do it.
2. Her declining ability to function is affecting her quality of life. She is having trouble keeping her medication schedule, which leaves her confused and irritable at times. (She has missed some planned events with friends because of her confusion, although she has not told her children.) She also is having a lot of difficulty getting to the phone quickly, and has taken a tumble or two. So far she has managed to get up again, but she may not always be able to do so.
  3. Mom is also concerned that if she moves into an assisted living facility, she will soon run out of money, forcing her to enter a skilled care facility long before she is ready – if she can get in at all. At that point, she feels that she will have lost everything that she cares about, and her quality of life will not even be measurable.
  4. Mom’s primary caregiver, Jean, lives more than an hour away. If there is an emergency, that is too far to be able to respond effectively. Both Mom and Jean are nervous about this issue, but have not come up with a workable solution. In addition, there is no one close by to notice on a daily basis whether or not Mom is taking her medicine correctly, or if she is having trouble walking; or worse yet, falls.
  5. Jean, as primary caregiver, is very concerned about her mother’s health and safety. Anxiety over her mother’s situation, combined with frustration at not knowing where to turn for help, have affected Jean’s productivity at

work – causing her even more worry. Jean's anxiety is also adversely affecting her personal life and her peace of mind.

### **First Steps**

This is too much for Jean to deal with alone. It's time for a family conference. Mom, Jean and siblings need to meet and discuss the situation. Those that cannot attend in person may make themselves available by conference call.

It is possible that Mom may be very defensive and want nothing to do with this family conference. She may reject any ideas or proposals that come out of the meeting. Jean and her siblings may want to prepare for and think through Mom's fears and potential defensiveness, being sensitive not only to Mom's physical needs, but her emotional concerns as well. It would be useful to validate Mom's desire to live independently in her home, and to point out that this meeting is about finding new ways to help her to do just that.

Concerns about health, safety and finances have to be aired, with everyone having an opportunity to talk. It is quite possible that Mom is not aware of the level of risk she may be facing if she continues with her present lifestyle. Mom and her children may not know the options that she may have available to her. A preliminary plan to address the problems should be made at this meeting, with each family member taking responsibility for researching and reporting on a part of the plan.

- A health assessment may be in order for Mom. A geriatric physician will

be able to assess Mom's current health status, and make recommendations regarding her ability to remain independent in her own home. The process may include consulting with each of Mom's physicians in order to fully coordinate a plan for care.

- A home safety assessment may be called for to point out ways to make Mom's home less hazardous, and also suggest installations such as grab bars in the bathroom to improve safety.
- Having a legal and financial assessment done would also be helpful. It would shed light on any shortcomings in Mom's documents and suggest possible options for consideration.

Gathering information is the first step toward making informed choices.

### **What's next...?**

Once information has been gathered, and assessments have been completed, the family may want to meet again to make decisions about Mom's care. She may still be well enough to be able to function at home with a little help for quite a while. Mom may be willing to have a nurse come in to set up her medications. She may also accept the idea that a twice-weekly visit from a home health aide could be beneficial. What no one may have thought of before is that Mom's main health and safety challenges might be addressed with the help of technology. There are a number of devices that are on the market today to help a person remain independent. Two examples that might be helpful in Mom's situation are:

- A Help button, or Personal Emergency Response Service, could be a wonderful assist for Mom, greatly reducing the time she might spend waiting for help should she fall. A specialized operator can summon help. It's simple to use and has other life enriching features like remote telephone answering, if wanted.
- An automated medication dispenser to ensure correct dosage and on-time delivery of medicine that had come to be a little confusing at times. It's easy to use and is flexible according to each client's needs.

For more about these and other medical devices for Mom, see the article by Sanford Freed elsewhere in this issue of *Mature Lifestyles*.

### **Last thoughts...**

Maintaining independence as long as possible and peace of mind for family caregivers are two very good reasons to investigate the use of home medical technology. There are many helpful devices on the market now, such as alarms for loved ones who wander. There are many more that may be widely available soon, such as a toothbrush containing a biosensing chip that checks your blood sugar while you are brushing your teeth.

Keep in mind that little things affect quality of life. Being able to join friends for lunch because you were clear enough to remember; being able to respond to the telephone without risking a fall because you have installed a new device which lets you answer remotely; moving through your home with ease because you have installed lighting and grab bars and removed small obstacles,

are all examples of the huge difference that little things can make. Little things do mean a lot.

**References:**

[www.access-able.org](http://www.access-able.org)

[www.americangeriatrics.org](http://www.americangeriatrics.org)

[www.pueblo.gsa.gov](http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov)

[www.safecall.biz](http://www.safecall.biz)

[www.SeniorHealthAdvantage.com](http://www.SeniorHealthAdvantage.com)

**More resources**

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network's web page ([www.caregiverresource.net](http://www.caregiverresource.net)) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver's Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, or e-mail at [Hanni@wmichcare.com](mailto:Hanni@wmichcare.com).

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. She is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network, a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of Mature Lifestyles.