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MONEYWISE

Who is taking care of Mom or Dad?

Private elder-care services growing exponentially



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Robert Peacock of Beauty In Motion can arrange a pedicure, manicure, facial or hair cut at any home or apartment in the Vancouver area. Berna Ho of With Care Home Transition will call, sell, pack, move and rearrange the contents of a life-long family home in the same city. Janet Craig of The Satisfied Soul in Toronto will cook favourite meals on site and freeze them - as well as delivering a big bag of kitty litter or potatoes, if you ask her nicely.

Calgary's Kerby Centre runs special day-long craft and exercise programs as part of its adult daycare service.

And then there's Andrea Nathanson.

A former nurse and the founder of Toronto-based Qualicare, she will compile a complete medical "resume," in addition to arranging and attending all doctor's appointments and tests, asking questions on her clients' behalf, snagging an appointment with the best specialist in the appropriate field, translating medical jargon, riding shotgun on hospital staff to

make sure your aged parent isn't left languishing in a crowded corridor or discharged with an intravenous tube still attached.

Welcome to one of the fastest growing and most lucrative business markets in Canada: private care for the elderly. As the population ages, health care budgets dwindle and work loads increase for extended family members, the range of services for those who are infirm or immobile has grown exponentially.

(The fastest growing segment of the population is those over age 80. And in the past decade, the percentage of the population over 65 has climbed to 13% from 11.6%.)

"Just six years ago if you said you provided home care services for the elderly, you had to explain what you were talking about," says John Schram, CEO of We Care, a nationally franchised caregiving service which has grown an average of 10% annually for the past eight years. "There's much greater need and much greater awareness now."

Audrey Guth of Diamond Personnel, a nanny agency with offices in Ottawa and Toronto notes that in the past two years, the placement of caregivers in homes has become about 25% of her business - with the potential, she believes, to hit about 50%.

"The demand is tremendous because no one can keep up with careers, young families and caring for elderly family members. The guilt gnaws at kids: They feel they should do more, but they just can't. And then everyone suffers."

Hospital recovery time is now about one third of what it used to be, and that means people need more help to recuperate at home.

Barbara Bartlett, manager of the Best, Western Voyageur Hotel in Newmarket, Ont. - where there are several large hospitals that draw patients from around the province - reports that discharged patients often come to her hotel for part of their recovery. The hospital just ships over some of the required gear such as oxygen and her staff sets it up for the patient.

The stress on the public health care system - specifically when it comes to elderly patients - is at



Andrea Nathanson and her 94-year-old grandmother, Minna Loomer, share a moment together at the Louis Briar care home in Vancouver. Nathanson, founder of Toronto-based Qualicare which provides health advocacy services, is currently helping to care for her grandmother.

the core of Ms. Nathanson's business. As a health care advocate, she fills in the gaps that career driven children with their own families, can't.

"However well intentioned they may be, people soon find out how time-consuming an illness can be. You have to wait hours for a test or appointment that takes a few minutes," she says. "Most people can't do that week after week. But we can and we do."

Qualicare, formed just two years ago, now employs four full-time case managers all of whom are registered nurses. An important part of their role, says Ms. Nathanson, is to deal with the emotional overlay of an illness.

"It can get very complicated when families confront sickness. It's a muddle of guilt, fear, acceptance - all hugely stressful for family members.

And especially for the patient," she says. "Removing that stress can lower their blood pressure and their anxiety."

Elderly patients often appreciate the presence of a neutral third party because there are things they don't want to discuss in front of their children.

"It's frequently a generational thing," she adds. "People want privacy. They may not want their kids to discuss their bodies or 'to see they're scared.'"

Equally challenging is breaking through the jargon and bureaucracy of the medical establishment and connecting with doctors, nurses and others at a human level.

"They're so busy they often get into a remote mode where they're just processing bodies not healing people," Ms. Nathanson observes. "The key is to engage them, to make them aware they're dealing with a real human being."

Humanizing illness at that level takes money as well as time and patience: Qualicare charges \$75 an hour for doctor's visits and other services in its individually focused Case Managed Care Program. A health resume costs \$175 and a monthly care maintenance program with telephone monitoring, monthly half-hour visits and health resume updates costs \$275.

In the end, if a parent can no longer live independently, there's always someone like Berna Ho to help with the transition to a senior's residence.

"People get overwhelmed by a profound move. They don't know where to start, what to do with a lifetime of stuff," she says.

"They may know it's time to make the move but the logistics can be paralyzing. Moral support and a good nudge go along way."

"What people don't realize is that it can be a huge relief, when all's said and done," says Ms. Ho. "Often it's not the elderly parents stalling a move, it's the kids. They're afraid of what it says about their time of life."

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