Practical Guide to the Health Care System:
How to talk to a doctor

Talking with a doctor can be daunting – but it doesn’t have to be. Here are a few tips to help you feel more comfortable and have a more productive conversation with your medical professional:

Prepare for your visit:
• Buy a spiral notebook dedicated to doctor visits, date all your entries and always bring the notebook with you.
• Prior to the visit, write down symptoms, questions or concerns as they occur to you.
• Think ahead to what the doctor might want to know so you have answers ready.
• List all your medications, vitamins and supplements.
• Provide the contact information of your other health care professionals.

During your visit, request what you need:
• If you are unfamiliar with a medical term or want to know how to spell what is being discussed, simply ask for help.
• If you don’t understand a procedure or treatment, ask for a fuller explanation.
• If the pace is too fast or you need time to process what is being said, ask the doctor to slow down or stop a moment.
• Request written material you can read at home.

Listen carefully as your doctor speaks to you:
• Maintain focus on what is being said.
• Jot down key points in your notebook.
• Repeat information back to the doctor to be sure you understand correctly.

Tell the truth:
• Set aside your ego, embarrassments and fears.
• Answer all questions as honestly and completely as possible.

Update on Alzheimer’s disease

This year, the Alzheimer’s Association and the National Institute on Aging jointly issued new guidelines for Alzheimer’s disease (AD), replacing those issued in 1984.

There are three significant changes: These guidelines place greater focus on early detection of this neurological disorder. The list of symptoms now go beyond memory impairment to include spatial cognition problems, impaired reasoning and difficulty expressing oneself with words. Finally, instead of just one, today’s criteria offer three phases of Alzheimer’s:

✦ Preclinical Alzheimer’s is the newly recognized and first stage of the disease. In this phase, key biological changes are happening, but the disease hasn’t yet caused any noticeable symptoms. Changes in brain benchmarks (called biomarkers) may occur years before symptoms can be detected by affected individuals or their doctors. These biomarkers can help identify changes and predict a person’s risk of developing AD.

✦ Mild Cognitive Impairment is the second stage. Here a person has mild changes in memory and thinking abilities that are noticeable but not severe enough to disrupt day to day life.

✦ Dementia is the stage in which impairments decrease a person’s ability to function independently in everyday life.

What do these new guidelines mean to us? Perhaps they remove some of the fear. With a broader acceptance of the importance of early detection, more people will be helped at earlier stages, and disabling consequences can be delayed.

Hope is growing . . .

Prayer: Comfort those who live in confusion and who can no longer trust their memories. Be with them and their caregivers each and every day. Amen.

Resources:
• advocatehealth.com
• alz.org/alzheimers_disease_what_is_alzheimers.asp
• ahaf.org/alzheimers (Alzheimer’s Disease Research, American Health Assistance Foundation)
• act.alz.org/chicago2012 (Walk to End Alzheimer’s, Sunday, Sept. 9, 2012, Montrose Harbor, Chicago, IL and other locations)