

UW System: Improving talks with doctors

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PALMYRA, Wisconsin – Whether it's the baroque language, the obscure diagnoses or the impenetrable bills, medicine is growing ever more complex. What information and strategies could help a relative caring for an elder with heart disease, Alzheimer's or dementia cope with the medical system?

A desire to answer that deceptively simple question explains why eight women are discussing a program called Care Talks in the social hall of the Palmyra United Methodist Church on a sunny August morning.

Four have already "graduated" from the four-session program; the other four plan to start soon.

UW-Madison professor of family medicine Paul Smith is leading the development and testing of Care Talks. He says that the need to improve communication with the medical system arose as the cardinal need in a 2011 survey of Green County people caring for adults who are older than 60.

And so in 2013, Smith says, he began to develop a way to "build on current communication skills and provide some additional skills." Care Talks is a set of four two-hour workshops for caregivers that "offer problem-solving methods for communication with the health care system," including receptionists, nurses, physician assistants, doctors, pharmacists and physical therapists.

Care Talks is being tested at five sites in Wisconsin, including Palmyra, just east of Whitewater. The project, part of the Community-Academic Aging Research Network

at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, operates through local Aging and Disability Resources Centers.

Smith's study is comparing trained adults to those who have yet to begin the training. "We are measuring the impact on the caregiver, and on the health and health outcome of the care partner," he says. "We are tracking physician office visits, hospitalizations, falls and medication errors, among other things."

The analysis is not finished, but the four Care Talks "alumni" at Palmyra seemed impressed (Their names aren't used here for privacy reasons).

"It's helped tremendously," says "Ann." "If I don't understand, I ask the doctor to please repeat. Now I ask for them to write out unfamiliar terms and drug names."

Ann has become an evangelist for the program. "When people ask, I say, 'We are learning how to speak to doctors, and to know who all the people are that come before the doctor, and why it's important to fill them all in on everything.'"