

Welcome Home

When Lianne Bilan first saw the movie *Away from Her* she was shocked. In the critically acclaimed Canadian film, an elderly woman with Alzheimer's disease is admitted to a long term care home. The administrator explains to the woman's family that there is a no-visit policy for at least one month to help the new resident get acclimatized.

The family weeps at this news; so did Bilan, a social worker and coordinator of long term care admissions at Belmont House in Toronto.

"At Belmont House, we think the involvement of familiar people [when a new resident is admitted] can help reduce relocation stress by providing comfort, familiarity and reducing the feeling of being abandoned," says Bilan. Family members and friends are welcomed at Belmont House and encouraged to visit as often as they wish.

Relocation stress syndrome

According to the Centre for Nursing and Health Studies at Athabasca University in Alberta, "Relocation stress syndrome is a real and valid disorder where individuals experience difficulty coping with the process of relocating from a familiar secure environment to one that is unfamiliar."

Symptoms of relocation stress can include sadness, crying, confusion, restlessness, sleep disturbance, withdrawal, lack of cooperation, anger, aggressiveness, changes in eating habits, weight loss, stomach problems, falls and hallucinations.

by Kristin Jenkins

This article was collaboratively written by Belmont House staff and Kristin Jenkins, a Toronto writer and editor who specializes in health and lifestyle issues. Special thanks to Lianne Bilan, social worker. For more information on Belmont House's welcoming process, contact Karen Yatabe, professional practice, quality and risk leader, at (416) 964-9231 ext. 246 or kyatabe@belmonthouse.com.

Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre supports Belmont House's approach to dealing with relocation stress and states that "Relocation of an elderly person may be a life-threatening event. The elderly person should be involved in the decision-making process as much as possible in order to increase his or her sense of control and predictability during the transition. Furthermore, family and staff involvement with the move can decrease stress for all involved."

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Changes in routine, particularly when an elderly resident with cognitive impairments is moved suddenly—from a home environment into a care facility or even from one room in the long term care home to another—can increase the risk of confusion, agitation and depression. This can, in turn, result in increased falls, self-care deficits and weight loss.

Prior to admission

At Belmont House, which is home to 140 long term care residents, core values include caring, excellence, innovation, respect, responsiveness and teamwork. The welcome process for new residents and their families has been designed to minimize stress—and the home's core values are embedded in the program. Among other things, the enhanced welcome process focuses on helping everyone feel more prepared prior to admission. The goal is to make admission day run as smoothly as possible by giving new residents and their family members an opportunity to discuss concerns beforehand.

"We recognize that this is a challenging time for both residents and families," says

Bilan, adding that family members can feel fearful and even guilty. "Our staff is there to support the family as well as the new resident."

One of the program's pillars is a pre-admission information package. This includes a checklist of key items new residents should bring with them—everything from clothing and a list of medications to legal documents such as power of attorney for care and property. There's also a quick information sheet that makes it easy for family members to contact members of the interdisciplinary team, including the attending physician.

"The names of key staff, when they're available and how to contact them, is all on one sheet," said Bilan, who helped design the program in 2005 in consultation with nursing staff and residents.

Just as important, a 'getting to know you biography' is created to familiarize the care team with the social history of new residents. This history is verbally reviewed with the members of the care team and a hard copy is placed on the resident's chart. It shares details of the new resident's place of birth, education and employment history and creates multiple points of entry into conversation.

"We want to know about their hobbies and interests; what makes life meaningful to them, what makes them laugh," explains Bilan.

Whenever possible, Bilan reviews the new resident's medical history with the registered nursing staff at least 24 hours prior to admission. Belmont House has also created a pre-admission risk identification sheet that highlights risk for falls, wandering and choking/swallowing difficulties. This sheet is included in the resident's long term care file and accompanies the resident to the unit.

Welcome to Belmont House

On the day of admission, Bilan personally welcomes new residents and their families at the main reception area of Belmont House. (When Bilan is not available, the admission-day welcome and orientation is carried

out by a member of the registered nursing staff or an activation coordinator.) Residents receive a card signed by Maria Elias, the CEO, welcoming them to their new home. They also receive a gift—an attractive picture frame with matting that says Belmont House. Bilan immediately explains the importance of open communication.

“If residents or family members have concerns, we ask that they notify staff right away so that the issue can be resolved and we can move forward,” she says.

If new residents are feeling up to a tour, Bilan takes them around their unit or Belmont House itself. Otherwise, she helps them to unpack their belongings, introduces them to staff and addresses questions they may have about their move to long term care and what it entails.

“It’s important to start with what the resident can manage,” says Bilan. “We take our cues from them.”

An invitation is extended to a family member to stay and share a lunch or dinner. This can be quite comforting for the new resident, helping to offset feelings of isolation and building trust. For residents who require additional support with their meal, the presence of family members may help to provide reassurance.

The first week

Over the course of the first week at Belmont House, new residents are visited by every member of their care team—the attending physician, activation coordinator, dietitian, social worker and physiotherapist, and registered nurses, personal support workers, housekeeping and dietary staff, pastoral care and volunteers. Each interaction assists the staff in getting to know the resident. Members of the resident care team then complete a comprehensive assessment and an individualized plan of care.

Each new resident’s response to admission day is unique. A select few find the process reassuring “because they recognize they need the support we can provide,” says Bilan. For most, however, the loss of privacy, space, control and independence can be frightening.

“Our approach is to respond to that,” says Bilan, noting that since the average age of the population at Belmont House is approximately 90 years, most new residents are admitted with multiple health

issues. “Many residents are admitted with varying degrees of cognitive impairment, which can make this transition all the more challenging.”

Paradoxically, new residents who are more cognitively aware may find the transition even more difficult. Belmont House provides spiritual and psychosocial support through its pastoral care services and social worker. In addition to professional services, friendly visiting volunteers take their cue to help smooth the process by engaging new residents in stimulating conversation. To facilitate this, Bilan meets with the volunteer coordinator to share only relevant information about new residents so that the best volunteer match can be found.

“We have a very diverse volunteer community of various ages and cultural backgrounds,” says Bilan, who provides information about the volunteer program to residents and family members and explores their interest in accessing friendly visiting. And whenever possible, new residents are paired up with other residents who have similar personalities or interests. Families are encouraged to become involved by becoming a volunteer or joining Belmont House’s Family Council.

The first few months

The welcome process doesn’t end the week after admission. It continues into the first few months of a new resident’s life at Belmont House. The initial care conference, which takes place in the first four to six weeks of admission, brings together all the members of the care team, including family members and the new resident, to informally discuss how the resident is adjusting. At this time, the physician reviews medications and establishes a plan of treatment. The new resident, family and staff identify any care needs and preferences and plan to meet those needs. This care conference is performed annually thereafter and whenever there is a significant change in status.

Activation staff arrange a welcome tea with new residents. This provides the CEO and directors with an opportunity to personally extend a welcome to new residents.

Feedback on the welcome program is obtained through welcome process evaluations and verbal feedback. The results are integrated into Belmont House’s Quality

Improvement Program. To date, feedback has been extremely positive, says Bilan. One family member commented that, “The welcome was fantastic and my mom is really enjoying the high level of care, interaction and recreation.” Another family member wrote, “The whole process was excellent. My wife’s pleasant acceptance was a great relief to me.”

But it is a new female resident, 93, who perhaps sums it up best: “I feel that I am adjusting well to life at Belmont House, despite some apprehension that I had at the beginning. There was a smooth transition [made possible] by staff on the floor and from the management team that took care of the preliminaries. I am a happy camper and I have no doubt this is the place for me given the condition of my health.” **LTC**