

# Enhancing Support from Informal Caregivers

Diabetes QUERI

June 2014

## Improving Self-Management

Patients with diabetes may have difficulty understanding and integrating information from their clinicians and applying it effectively to their disease self-management. In addition, increased time constraints on providers limit health systems' abilities to provide the support many patients need to manage the day-to-day demands of their self-care. Low-cost technology can enable family and friends, as well as peers who have diabetes, to help patients with self-management activities.

## The Peer-to-Peer and CarePartners Programs

Patients typically remember only about half of the information they are given during standard outpatient visits. Patients with complex illnesses such as diabetes, who also have psychosocial problems associated with low incomes, are often the least able to integrate information from their clinicians and apply it effectively to their disease self-management. Moreover, increased time constraints on providers limit health systems' abilities to provide the support many patients need to manage the day-to-day demands of their self-care. The Diabetes Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (Diabetes-QUERI) is working to extend the reach of diabetes patients' healthcare teams, bringing targeted health monitoring and behavior change support to Veterans and their families between clinical encounters. Effective integration of patients' formal disease management, with informal support from patients' social networks, is one of the key goals. Another goal is to accomplish this integration using communication tools that are low-cost, flexible, and functional without requiring specialized hardware in the home.

## How Can Patients Support Each Other?

One promising approach to enhancing self-management support for chronic illness is to increase mutual support among Veterans with diabetes who are all facing similar health and behavioral challenges. These peers can fill the gaps in traditional care management programs and give patients a perspective that they simply cannot get from their clinical team. Research also suggests that peer-support relationships may improve the self-care and outcomes of those giving support, as much as for those receiving it.

## What is the Peer-to-Peer Program?

In order to build on the potential benefits of peer support, Diabetes-QUERI investigators have developed a multifaceted intervention that combines group self-management training with patient-to-patient telephone support. The program allows Veterans to call their peer-support partner at no additional cost using any touch-tone phone; moreover, they can enter a peer relationship without the need to share their home phone number or other identifying information.

## What is the Peer-to-Peer TEC Program?

An enhancement to Peer-to-Peer support has recently been developed by Diabetes-QUERI investigators, which uses an iPad application. Called TEC (Technology-Enhanced Coaching), this program will expand on the success of peer support programs by putting innovative tools in the hands of Veterans with diabetes. Veteran coaches who have demonstrated effective control of their own diabetes will be trained to use communication skills to guide their peers through a diabetes education and decision aid, which is an iPad application. The application shows patients their personal risk and medication information derived from baseline labs and self-reported survey data. The tool encourages interaction by providing a choice of materials to view, using audio-visual elements and incorporating a goal-setting process for developing self-management action steps and questions to discuss with their doctor at their next clinic visit.

## How Can Family and Friends Help?

Veterans' families and friends are often willing to assume a greater role in self-management support and could help to fill the gaps in traditional systems of care. Several prior studies suggest targeted services that enhance the role of informal caregivers can improve patients' self-management and health outcomes. Diabetes-QUERI investigators are developing new services that can provide informal caregivers with more effective education about patients' needs and advanced

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tools for patient assessment and assistance with behavior change. The goals of this service are to enable caregivers to:

- Identify emerging problems early to prevent serious acute events such as an ER visit or hospitalization;
- Encourage and improve patients' medication use, self-monitoring, and other self-care behaviors; and
- Assist the patient in understanding and following through with self-care plans recommended by their clinicians.

### *What is the CarePartners Program?*

The CarePartners Program links patients with diabetes and patients with other chronic illnesses with informal

caregivers living outside of the home. Patients who use the service receive regular health and behavioral monitoring via automated telephone calls, which also provide targeted feedback on reported problems. The patient's informal caregiver, or CarePartner, receives reports via email based on the patient's weekly assessments. CarePartners also have access to a comprehensive website with more detailed information about the patient's illness and how they can help. Urgent health problems are reported to the patient's healthcare team via email and fax, and care managers can enroll Veterans and review their status using a specialized website.

## How Do I Learn More?

For information about the Peer-to-Peer Program, contact:

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For information about CarePartners, contact:

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## Web Resources

For more information about the QUERI program in general, and to link to all of the individual QUERI Centers, please go to

**[www.queri.research.va.gov](http://www.queri.research.va.gov)**

## The Diabetes-QUERI Executive Committee

Each QUERI Center is led by a research expert and a clinician. The research expert and Director for Diabetes-QUERI is **Caroline Richardson, M.D.**, and the Clinical Coordinators are **Leonard Pogach, M.D., M.B.A.**, and **Susan Kirsh, M.D.** Other Diabetes-QUERI staff include: **Sarah Krein, Ph.D., R.N.** (Co-Research Coordinator); **Julie Lowery, Ph.D.** (Co-Implementation Research Coordinator); **Laura Damschroder, M.S., M.P.H.** (Co-Implementation Research Coordinator); and **Nicholas Yankey, M.P.H., M.S.W.** (Administrative Coordinator). The Executive Committee includes other experts in the field of diabetes mellitus: Paul Conlin, M.D.; Linda Kinsinger, M.D., M.P.H.; Jonathan Nebeker, M.D., M.S.; David Aron, M.D, M.S.; Gayle Reiber, Ph.D., M.P.H.; Anne Sales, Ph.D., R.N.; Alexander Young, M.D., M.S.H.S.; Joanne Shear, M.S., FNP-BC; William Yancy, M.D.; Michael Goldstein, M.D.; Sharon Watts, D.N.P., RN-C, CDE; and Mark McConnell, M.D.