

Kathleen Martin is an attorney with O'Donnell, Weiss & Mattei, P.C., and a newspaper columnist for The Mercury, which gave permission for this article to be reprinted.

April 15, 2008

Support available for those who care for a love one with Alzheimer's

The Notebook by Nicholas Sparks is a beautiful love story in which one of the spouses suffers from Alzheimer's disease. Caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease is very challenging, often resulting in the need for institutionalization for the person who is ill. But as this story shows, that while loving someone with Alzheimer's takes its toll emotionally, there can still be rewards.

There is no question support for those caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease or other dementias is key to being able to manage the caregiving years. This support can come from family and friends, from support groups, and from written information giving suggestions on how to manage the stress involved in such caregiving. One example of such written information can be found at HelpGuide.org (www.helpguide.org/elder).

The authors of the article on "Alzheimer's Caregivers Support" indicate that this type of caregiving is the greatest challenge of elder care. In fact, depression is more common among the caregivers than it is among the patients. It is vital that the caregivers seek support and relief, and maintain their own mental and physical health as the caregiving continues. Some typical problems and issues for caregivers of Alzheimer's patients include depression and grief as their loved one declines into a helpless and anonymous person; frustration, irritability and anger; loss of the caregiver's identity as his or her loved one loses her or his ability to remember their lives together; and social isolation and loneliness as one's energy is drained by never ending caregiving.

There are positive aspects related to such caregiving. There can be deepening emotional bonds as more time is spent with the person in the early stages. It can boost the caregiver's self esteem to know that you are creating security and well being for an increasingly helpless person. People discover new friends, or discover strengths in themselves that they were not aware of previously.

It is important to plan ahead to minimize the problems that can arise during the caregiving period. The patient's wishes for end of life care should be established (in writing) while the patient is still able to do so. Financial and legal issues should be addressed and resolved. It is important to make sure that the spouse and/or children are able to manage the patient's finances when he or she is no longer able to do so through a well drafted Power of Attorney. Home safety and socializing should be addressed. A doctor should be involved to assist with symptom management. There should be a plan of care in place that will be adjusted as time goes on to fit the demands of caregiving as they increase.

There are warning signs of stress in caregivers for those with dementia that should not be ignored. There are also ways for caregivers to protect their own health and well being by living a healthy lifestyle, maintaining a positive attitude, staying in contact with the "outside" world, and maintaining your own interests and lifestyle. When it comes time to institutionalize your loved one, it is important to seek legal help to make sure that a way is found to pay for long term care.