



The Power of Peers

Shepherd Center's innovative peer support program helps boost confidence, ease the transition home and lower hospital readmissions.

People with spinal cord injuries (SCI) and their families often feel ill-prepared to return home and deal with the many challenges related to accepting and living with such injuries.

At Shepherd Center, educating patients about what to expect has always been a priority, especially as it relates to helping them understand, recognize and guard against skin, bladder and bowel issues – the leading reasons people with SCI return to the hospital after discharge. Until recently, Shepherd clinicians have been at the helm of patient education. But it seems there might be a much more powerful messenger – peers who, like newly injured patients, have faced a life-changing injury and the challenges and realities that accompany it.

“While leaving Shepherd Center is an important milestone in someone’s recovery, we noticed that as discharge dates approached, many patients panic and feel unprepared and overwhelmed, even though we had spent a lot of time educating them,” said Mike Jones, Ph.D., vice president of research and technology at Shepherd Center. “We knew we needed to do things differently to help ease the transition and set up patients for success.”

As such, Shepherd Center developed several efforts to engage peers throughout the continuum of care – thanks to grants from the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) and the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation. Shepherd Center is the first rehabilitation hospital to integrate such a multi-tiered, innovative peer support program for people with SCI. These programs are proving to make a real difference.

“It’s really based on the concept that people learn better from someone they feel is like them and who has

‘been there, done that,’” said Julie Gassaway, RN, MS, director of health and wellness research at Shepherd Center and the PCORI research initiative.

Peer mentors make a real difference

Data show patients with SCI who receive more intensive peer mentorship have:

- More active engagement in rehabilitation
- Greater self-efficacy
- Lower hospital readmissions

Boosting Self-Efficacy Through Peer Modeling and Training

Shepherd Center’s peer mentoring efforts focus on building patients’ self-efficacy – the belief that they have the know-how and skills to do the things required to manage their condition.

Interventions to promote self-efficacy at Shepherd Center include:

- One-to-one peer mentoring
- Peer-directed patient education
- Patient portal for use post-discharge

Shepherd Center’s peer support program is run by three full-time and two part-time staff members who have also recruited and trained more than 75 volunteer mentors. The programs stem from insights shared by patients and families through structured focus groups, and are based on validated models used for managing chronic conditions including diabetes.

“The goal for people with SCI when they leave the hospital is to be able to self-manage conditions that are associated with their injury,” said Minna Hong, peer support program manager. “They need to know how to recognize early signs of a problem and take the necessary steps to prevent it or minimize the severity.”

Peer mentors work with nurse educators to teach patients about skin issues, bowel and bladder management, prevention of urinary tract infections, high blood pressure, blood clots, spasms, infection control, and more.

Peer mentors also assist with patients’ psychosocial adjustment. “Seeing peers model how to live successful and happy lives while managing all the associated issues that come with an SCI including using a wheelchair, that’s pretty powerful for our patients,” said Pete Anziano, peer support program coordinator and instructional designer.

Show me, don’t just tell me.

Peers are natural models and can help allay concerns by demonstrating to patients how to manage potential complications or adapt in certain situations.

The idea is that if self-efficacy (confidence) is improved through the peer-to-peer experience, which focuses on peers demonstrating and describing what works for them rather than telling patients what to do. Patients will then develop the requisite skills for better self-care and decision making, which can reduce complications and hospital readmissions.

Research shows Shepherd’s patient-centered, peer-led education initiatives are more effectively engaging patients. People in peer-led self-care education classes showed significantly more signs of being positively engaged (e.g., asking more questions, joining in the conversation, gesturing in agreement) compared with those participating in the standard, lecture-style classes. In turn, they are more prepared to recognize and take steps to manage problems.

“We are giving patients the confidence to problem solve and care for their health needs, whether it be bowel, bladder or skin issues, and the belief that they can go back to some of the activities they used to do – of course, within their new normal,” Dr. Jones said.

One-to-One Peer Mentoring

Through this program, patients can readily connect with and learn from other people with SCI – both at Shepherd and after discharge. Peers are matched with patients based on the level and type of injury, demographics and other preferences.

“The one-on-one mentoring is really the key – both during and after a stay at Shepherd,” Gassaway said. “Peers meet with patients in the gym, cafeteria, hallway, or in a scheduled meeting to offer advice and support. Even after discharge, being able to call someone is an important part of the process.”

Jones adds, “There is growing awareness that while we can’t support these patients for the rest of their lives, a community of peers which we nurture through a dedicated Facebook page, can. Peers often have more relevant answers and advice for how to continue to be happy and healthy.”

Peer-led Self-care Education Classes and Support

Peers, along with nurse educators, lead a series of one-hour, interactive, personal care classes to educate patients about living with SCI. Topics include skin issues, bowel and bladder management, prevention of urinary tract infections, blood pressure control, blood clots, spasms, infection control, and more. Each class is tailored to what is most concerning to patients. Peers share personal stories and provide practical tips and advice. They are able to use humor to make light of personal mishaps, which can help diffuse patients’ anxieties and patients then become more engaged in discussions.

Peer mentors have also become an integral part of the patient’s treatment team. For example, they can be found in the gym demonstrating various techniques to patients. They frequently join therapists when taking patients on public outings to demonstrate use of public transportation, go shopping or eat at

a restaurant. In this setting, peers can show patients how to navigate the challenges that arise – carrying groceries, getting money out of their wallet, or negotiating uneven sidewalks or inaccessible doorways. Peers also run monthly community meetings where all members of the SCI community are invited to share personal experiences and seek advice from others living with SCI. Current patients attending these meetings are exposed to people living in the community and gain valuable insight into what life may be like after discharge. Prior to the general meeting, peers offer separate male and female support groups focusing on sexuality and intimacy, parenting and aging with SCI.

Patient Engagement Portal

Shepherd Center launched a new portal in June 2016, for patients to conveniently and securely store and manage information related to their SCI. Electronic copies of admission documents, discharge instructions, medications and prescriptions are loaded into the portal from Shepherd Center’s electronic medical record system. The portal also encourages patients to input information about allergies, medication, equipment and supplies, emergency contacts, and community contacts and to update this information as time goes on to keep all information current. It also allows patients to invite care providers – family members, caregivers, community providers – into their portal so that information can be shared easily. And, it includes an extensive resource list to help find information and resources needed when transitioning back into home communities.

Social Media and Online Communities

Social media is actively connecting peers in ways that were once not possible, transcending geographic boundaries. Shepherd Center’s dedicated SCI peer Facebook page has grown to more than 2,500 friends from all over the world. Discussions are monitored and the page has become a very powerful tool for posing questions, problem-solving and sharing tips,

which is especially helpful for patients when they return home and the network of support they had at Shepherd Center is no longer there.

Integrating Peers Across the Continuum

In addition to being available when requested by patients, peers have become thoughtfully integrated across the continuum of rehabilitation care provided at Shepherd Center.

“Clinicians – once hesitant to include peers in the delivery of health information and services – are now eagerly looking for ways to involve them in treatment sessions because they see how effective they are in engaging and teaching patients,” Gassaway said. “It’s become part of the organizational culture. We are fortunate that Shepherd Center supports this kind of innovation.”

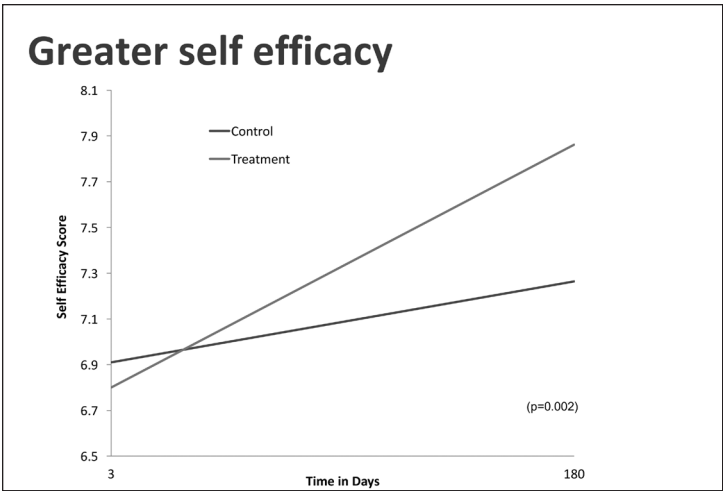
Results that Have Exceeded Expectations

“We already see improvements in self-efficacy, much higher levels of engagement in the education classes with patients asking more questions and participating in discussions, and it’s clear that it’s making an impact on hospital readmissions, too,” Dr. Jones said.

“What started out as a research study to look at one-to-one peer mentoring and peer-led education programs has morphed into a much broader focus where peers are an accepted and integral part of the patient experience,” he added.

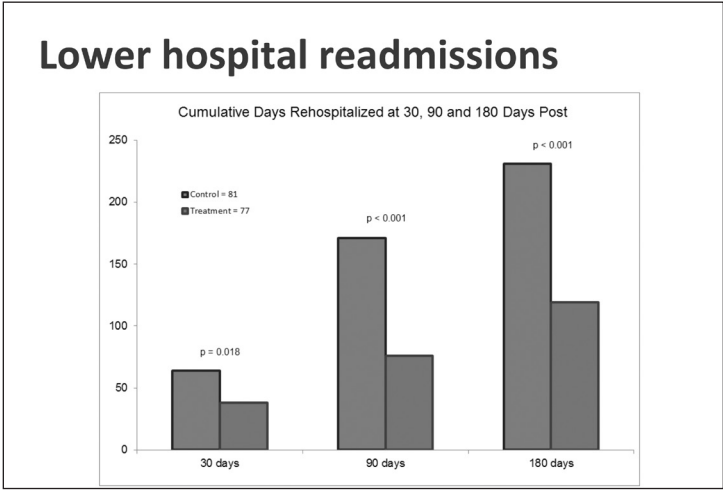
Shepherd Center’s peer support program is also drawing national attention. Douglas Zatzick, M.D., at the University of Washington in Seattle, a psychiatrist by training, said: “Shepherd Center is a pioneer in developing a peer model for SCI, and they’ve managed to find a whole network of peers who can match to different levels of injury. The data validate these efforts and show that you can improve patients’ self-efficacy by engaging peers who share the common experience of a major injury and rehabilitation.”

Dr. Zatzick and his team have conducted randomized comparative effectiveness trials pairing patients with



a care manager to address their concerns. It seems by actively engaging patients in this way, concerns were greatly reduced, and this group also had a 15 percent reduction in emergency department visits in just six months. Dr. Zatzick believes this work will lead to recommendations to include attention to patient concerns, including peer support as an essential aspect of post-injury care in national practice guidelines. He and his team are also conducting a pilot program to match peer mentors with people with high levels of emotional distress following an injury.

The Shepherd team is now working to determine how these strategies can be replicated elsewhere. For more information about Shepherd Center’s peer support program, please contact Julie Gassaway at 404-350-7637 or Minna Hong, Peer Support Program Manager at 404-350-7373.



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