

Technology bringing comfort to seniors in assisted living settings

Google Home, music devices enhance clients' sense of well-being

By VELVET SPICER

When Jack Nodar was hospitalized three years ago for an operation, he never could have imagined that he would leave the hospital permanently blind. But that's what happened.

Nor could he have imagined that being blind would lead to a fall that required reconstructive hip surgery. But that happened too.

Nodar remains positive though. While recuperating from his hip surgery at Jewish Home of Rochester, Nodar had an unlikely companion to help him pass the time and keep his spirits high: Google Home.

"I ask a question and Google gives me an answer," Nodar says with a smile, demonstrating how the device works by asking what day it is. "And then I like to do some music and I like if Google can tell us a joke."

Google Home is just one way in which area nursing homes, retirement communities and medical facilities are using new technology to enhance their patients' lives both physically and mentally. Dallas Nelson M.D., a geriatrician with the University of Rochester Medical Center, touts a number of technologies that range from automated pill dispensers to telemedicine.

Nelson, who cares for some patients at area independent living facilities, recalls the son of one patient building an automatic pill dispenser for his father. At the time there was no such thing.

"Now there are several automated pill dispensers," Nelson says. "And that's super helpful for anybody with a memory disorder, those with many pills, or if it's a complex pill regimen such as with Parkinson's disease."

Newer devices can even call a family member if the individual fails to take their medications at the prescribed times, she adds.

"They'll at times be able to keep a resident at a lower and less expensive level of care, a less restrictive level of care, just because they're getting assistance with their medications," Nelson says of the devices.

Telemedicine is an area that's gaining steam, Nelson notes, particularly in long-term care situations. Since patient health change assessments must be made by a registered nurse or someone with a higher level of training, and given that many assisted living facilities employ LPNs, telemedicine has helped reduce the instances of emergency department utilization, Nelson explains.

An LPN can connect with someone like Nelson via telemedicine to help assess a patient in long-term care, rather than taking that patient to the emergency room.

And telemedicine helps bridge care access problems for those who do not drive or who live in rural areas. The Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, uses a wide variety of technologies that are transforming health care and is recognized as a world leader in the development and use of telehealth. VA telemedicine services range from audiology to cardiology to pain management and more. Nelson notes that URM has partnered



Meghan Bevins watches as Beatrice Sadinsky uses the It's Never Too Late program.

with Excellus BlueCross BlueShield to put telemedicine in a few nursing homes.

"So on nights and weekends when we wouldn't normally have a provider in-house, if there is a change in condition our providers can see the patient on a webcam and help to assess the patient," she says. "Excellus has put the machines in and is willing to pay a little bit for the nursing home to turn it on and has agreed to pay us the equivalent of a face-to-face visit, which is a huge deal because that's one of the (top) barriers to utilization."

While doctors and clinicians use technological advances to improve the medical conditions of patients, Rochester's senior living facilities and long-term care providers use technology to help elderly residents maintain and improve their quality of life on a social, emotional and mental acuity level.

St. Ann's Community—which offers assisted living, memory care, nursing home and retirement communities—is rolling out a service that will allow residents to schedule events and connect with other residents, as well as allow families to get real-time information on what and how a loved one is doing.

Caremerge, a web-based technology designed to keep the elderly connected with each other and their loved ones, is being rolled out at St. Ann's various facilities in a couple of phases so as not to overwhelm residents, said Michael Larche, the organization's chief information officer.

The first phase will keep track of calendar events and allow residents to sign up for events and see what others have signed up for. It also allows caregivers such as recreational therapists to see if their residents have taken part in activities prescribed for them.

"We are currently operating what I describe as the pilot program," Larche says. "We've got some using the community engagement electronic means to see and interact with the calendar. We're using the pilot to get the other community residents excited."

St. Ann's has enlisted residents' family members for focus groups on Caremerge's next phase, which will include the ability of a loved one to see what mom or dad participated in this week.

"The software has the ability to do quite a bit," Larche says. "We're taking a very methodical, surgical, thoughtful approach in how we roll this out and being very cogni-

zant of the feedback that's coming from our residents, as well as the family members."

The program will be available for residents and their families via their own computers or tablets, cellphones and at kiosks set up at St. Ann's facilities.

"First and foremost, from the resident's perspective, it is about a level of connection amongst themselves and connection with their families," Larche said of Caremerge's benefits. "The other benefit is the fact that (technology) allows them to feel young in a way, and that in itself is energizing. It's keeping our residents engaged and connected."

Connection is a common theme among senior living facilities that are using technology to enhance their residents' experiences. Introducing Nodar to Google Home, for example, was one way in which Jewish Senior Life relied on technological advances.

"It was a wonderful companion and we have since purchased one (for home) because it was such a unique item for someone who's blind," says Nodar's wife, Frances. "It's a life changer. Beyond being a wonderful companion and keeping the mind stimulated, it's so very critical to distract when you're upset or in a panic. It definitely enhanced his daily life."

Jewish Senior Life has employed a number of other technological advances in its residences, including the use of iPods and a software program to engage its elderly clientele. The agency's Music & Memory program—adopted from a leading program recognized globally—brings personalized music to Jewish Home of Rochester residents through technology.

"It really brings them comfort—a source of remembering—and it's created a lot of great transitions as well," says Meghan Bevins, director of recreation.

Funded by the Bunny & Mort Skirboll Family Fund, Jewish Senior Life's long-term care campus has 65 iPods in use that help seniors reconnect with their past and relax during sundowning, a symptom of dementia in which an individual experiences late-day confusion or agitation.

"I like to listen to it when I'm feeling a little down," says Joyce Smith, a resident of Jewish Senior Life's Green House Cottages. "I think it makes you more relaxed. A lot of times when you know pieces of music it gives you a sense of calm, a sense of peace."

Smith's personalized iPod has classical music and music from the '50s and '60s.

Listening to classical music reminds her of music she used to play on the piano, while jazz music and songs by Frank Sinatra remind her of her late husband because those were the love songs they listened to when they first began dating.

The iPods also allow staff to jump certain hurdles of communication since music is universal, Bevins adds.

"When you marry together music and technology, it is a way for us to offer residents for whom English is a second language a way to connect to their culture," she says. "Hearing your native language, especially through music, has been a great way to connect with our residents."

But Music & Memory is not a babysitter, Bevins says.

"We don't want it popped on someone's head all day long," she explains, but it can be used to sooth individuals at certain times of the day.

Another piece of technology Jewish Senior Life uses is "Never Too Late," a software program that its recreation staff uses to keep residents healthy and well balanced. The program touches on spiritual life, physical self and emotions and social and cognitive domains, Bevins says.

Residents can use the computer program to virtually visit the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, for example, or visit a favorite fishing hole or a favorite vacation spot.

"So through this application you can go through anyplace on the planet and allow them to be able to see that," Bevins says.

The software also enables residents to get physical through group exercise or virtually fly a plane with a flight simulator, or for those with reduced motor skills, a screen to pop bubbles like bubble wrap.

"We're just focusing on that basic skill of popping bubbles, but the therapist is sitting there evaluating how they're standing, their balance, their motion as they're reaching out to pop bubbles," Bevins says, explaining how Never Too Late helps both the resident and her caregivers.

Jewish Senior Life also has an application called "My Story," which gives families of residents the opportunity to check in on their loved one and build stories about their lives.

"So this allows our families to have a way to put in information about their loved ones and build their story," Bevins explains. "What does mom like? What brings her comfort? How does she relax at the end of the day? Who are her grandchildren? All of this fills the story that we as staff are able to view and get to know mom or dad a little better. Through technology we're really able to bridge that gap between residents and families."

Technology has allowed Jewish Senior Life to cater to the diverse population it finds in its skilled nursing facility. It allows the organization to program for everyone, Bevins says.

"With It's Never Too Late, Google Home and Music & Memory, all of the technology helps to bring identity, which is something that has always been a challenge for traditional long-term care," Bevins adds. "We're helping bring that back to them. Whether it's through the music or it's through all these different applications, what we're pioneering by bringing technology to our residents is identity, connecting and choice."

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