



Winter 2003

# Keeping In Touch

News For Family Caregivers

by Lynn Cibuzar, LSW, DARTS Service Coordinator

## Caring for Mom – A Privilege

Her skin is like porcelain,  
so thin and translucent.  
Her hair curls easily around old  
brush rollers.

“Bob, Bob,” she calls,  
“Are you out there?”

“Ya Ya,” Bob answers,  
“I’m in the kitchen.”

He prepares coffee for the  
morning rituals.

The skin has been showered  
and rollers decorate her head.  
Coffee and newspaper start the  
days of the 89th year.

What a privilege it is to  
witness aging.

To be present for the wrapping  
of the package that is grace.

To love back the human who  
gave you life.

And facilitate the distribution of  
meals and meds.

*Janie O'Connor*  
Manager, Training/Education  
DARTS

## Caregiver Compassion Fatigue: Burnout and More

*It seems that we are humbled before the great events of life. Events over which we have no power, no influence. Events that do not play fair. To be humbled like this is not meant to be punishment, but rather Death grooming us to awaken.*

*Stephanie Ericsson, Companion Through the Darkness*

“I don’t think I can go on. My gas tank is on empty, and I feel like there is yet a 100 miles to go,” said a daughter who assists her mother, a delightful 90 year old who has many physical ailments. This caregiver is suffering from **compassion fatigue**.

And she is not alone. Many caregivers feel burnt out, stressed, and tired. How does it happen? When does caregiving become overwhelming and then erupt into burnout? Why does the compassion well run dry? How can a caregiver maintain the commitment, much less grow and thrive as a person?

“Family caregiving is an emotional roller coaster that can leave a person exhausted, bewildered, and dislodged, wondering how she or he can feel so helpless...Each stage of an illness presents a succession of hurdles, stretching hearts more than it seems possible to bear. At times it would be enough just to hear, ‘you’re doing a good job,’ but even that reinforcement can be elusive,” said Beth Witrogen McLeod in her book, Caregiving.

Spiritual teacher Ram Dass has studied and written about elements of compassion fatigue. He finds that there are deeper causes for burnout than just sheer physical weariness. These include:

- Expectations of specific results (ones that we want)
- Self doubt as to whether you’re up to the tasks
- Blame if you’re not [up to the tasks]
- Difficulty setting limits without feeling guilty

It’s not always our efforts that cause us to burn out, he writes in How Can I Help?, but how we interpret them. He says, “The problem of burnout is not the work itself but how much self-importance we invest in it.”

He suggests that the more we take credit or blame for things, the better chance we have of burnout. If we begin to think we have the power to control all, we will burn out. Dass proposes that we shift our perspective to that of a “witness” – one who works in cooperation with life forces over which we have no control and becomes a player with them.

We can’t control all caregiving outcomes. Things can go wrong. People get sicker in spite of all of our efforts. Some people never seem to be content.

*(continued on back)*

*(continued from front)*

When caregivers base their self esteem on how the ill family member is feeling and doing, they are on their way to compassion fatigue.

If we act more like a witness rather than try to have total control, we'll be better at working with the outcomes. Things can go wrong, and we don't need to blame ourselves. We can have a bad day and still know that we are doing an exceptional job in helping our family member. We can say "I can't do it all," and know that it is okay.

This is an important lesson for family caregivers.

If you want some coaching help to prevent caregiver compassion fatigue, give our Caregiver Support Services line a call at **651-234-2262**. We will talk through some options with you.

## for your information

### Options for Buying Medications

Prescription drug prices have been rising at three times the rate of inflation, and consumer spending for medications doubled from 1995 to 2000. The average retail prescription price now exceeds \$45, according to a recent report by the Kaiser Family Foundation. What's more, drug costs increase as we age – older adults spend more than \$700 a year filling prescriptions, almost twice the national average. Until our politicians take action on this issue, we want you to know about some options that may save you money.

**Medimart Pharmacy** (Winnipeg, Canada) has an outlet at the Quello Clinic located in the Mall of America. Prescriptions there are often filled at a lower cost. The doctors are both US-certified and Canada-certified, and they schedule appointments on 4 days every month. You pay an annual fee of \$100 and bring in prescriptions from your own doctors. The Quello Clinic doctor reviews your prescription, examines you, and writes a new prescription for the Canadian equivalent of the drug. It takes between 5 and 14 days for the prescription to be filled. Customers can order a three-month supply at one time. On average, savings through Medimart average between 40% and 70%. For more information call toll-free, 1-866-580-9730.

Another option for Canada-priced medications is **Canadian Rx**, offered through the Minnesota Senior Federation for their members. The Federation is a local advocate for the issues of persons age 50 and over, with over 25 programs that serve 60,000 members. They have negotiated with Canadian exporters to secure better medication pricing without going to Canada. Like Medimart, they also claim a cost savings of over 40%. To get more information, an order kit, or a price quote, call the Minnesota Senior Federation at 651-645-0261, ext. 124, M-F from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. If you have Internet access, go to [www.mnseniors.org](http://www.mnseniors.org) to get price quotes and see whether this program can work for you.

Remember, to use the Minnesota Senior Federation's program, you must be a dues paying member – membership costs \$19.00 per year for a single person or \$29 a year for a couple. To become a member call 651-645-0261.

## from the caregiver library

The following are excerpts from writings of a woman (Virginia) after she watched the PBS caregiving documentary, "& Thou Shalt Honor," which aired in October 2002. Virginia's complete reaction is posted on the Internet at <http://www.thoushalthonor.org/phorum/read.php?f=5&i=22&t=1&v=t>, which is part of the web site [www.atsh.org](http://www.atsh.org).

*As a nurse practitioner in a rural Hawaiian community, where traditional values of numerous immigrant peoples (from all over the Pacific Rim, including North America) converge, I see where the strengths of family increase the coping skills of the elderly and teach great richness of heart and spiritual values to the young.*

*The priceless value of intangibles...of being used for a purpose greater than one's own tiny, personal identity...is not something that is voiced by the majority of messages to which the average child, teen, and young adult is exposed. Your special was exquisitely sensitive in focusing on this.*

*I loved "& Thou Shalt Honor".... especially the intergenerational segments. We do owe our lives to our families, our communities, the planet.*

*Aloha...malama pono*

DARTS has a videotape copy of the PBS documentary in our Caregiver Library. Call Alicia at 651-234-2245 to borrow this tape or to learn more about other resources in the library. You can also see the DARTS Caregiver Library bibliography online at <http://www.darts1.org/PDF/cg-library02.pdf>.