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UPMC LIFE CHANGING MEDICINE

Inclusion in the Workplace: National Disability Awareness Month

The following article is part of the Inclusion in the Workplace series, sponsored by the UPMC Center for Inclusion and the Employee Partnership Council.

In addition to being Dignity & Respect Month, October also is National Disability Awareness Month. Ensuring that UPMC facilities and services are as accessible as possible for everyone is vital to creating an inclusive environment. For people with disabilities to be treated with dignity and respect, it's important that physical, communication, and attitudinal barriers be removed to give them full access to care.

The UPMC Disabilities Resource Center (DRC) was established in 2007 to improve access to health care for people with disabilities. The DRC reviews the accessibility of UPMC facilities and existing policies, and helps those in the community who identify opportunities for improvement. The DRC also offers a wide variety of educational resources and training programs to help UPMC employees provide the best possible experience for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities often run into physical obstacles before they even reach the front door. Reserved parking spaces for people with disabilities are commonplace, but it's important not only to have spots with a 60-inch access aisle so people in wheelchairs can enter or exit their cars, but also to have spaces wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair lift. Inside the building or office, it's important that there be sufficient space for someone in a wheelchair to move freely, and that there not be obstructions or other hazards that could pose a problem for someone using crutches or someone with low vision. Exam rooms can be cramped, with furniture and equipment that isn't always optimal for someone in a wheelchair or with physical limitations.

The barriers to communication are often just as simple, yet profound. It's important that signs be written in a font that's large enough for people with low vision to read, and placed at a height so that someone in a wheelchair can see them. Large-print forms can help those with low vision as well, although those who are blind require forms translated into Braille or offered in an audio format.

But the most important way to aid communication is to follow Dignity & Respect Tip 24: Listen. As with all patients, the best way to communicate with people with disabilities is to ask questions and listen closely to how they respond. With those who have difficulty speaking, listening may take more time and patience, and for deaf patients who use sign language an interpreter may be needed, but listening is as important with people with disabilities as it is with everyone else. Perhaps even more so, because many people with disabilities are extremely well-versed on their particular condition and can provide information and insight that can help make a visit even more helpful.

These issues also illustrate the attitudinal barriers to providing care to people with disabilities. Too often, people focus on what they can't do. It's very important to see the whole person, not just the disability. There are times when people with disabilities are treated as though they aren't capable of making decisions about treatment on their own. Caregivers sometimes speak to family members or translators as though they were the ones making the decision, rather than the patient. It is a serious error to assume that someone who has a physical disability, or has difficulty communicating, also has a mental disability.

Because of these barriers, people with disabilities are less likely to seek routine medical care than those without disabilities. That's why making every UPMC facility and office as accessible and inclusive as possible is essential, because providing the best possible care to those with disabilities can occur only when these patients feel they are treated with dignity and respect.