



When Seniors Should Consider Seeing a Geriatrician

A geriatrician is a physician who specializes in care for older adults. Geriatricians, not to be confused with gerontologists (who study aging), take a headstrong approach to tackling health problems that some primary care physicians might dismiss as irreversible results of aging.

Often times in matters of elder law we encounter scenarios where we cannot help families without excellent medical resources. Frequently, a geriatrician is “just what the doctor ordered”. With a combination of topnotch healthcare and expert legal advocacy, seniors can maximize their independence as they age.

We connected with geriatrician Dr. Michael F. Shank, DO of formerly of Rose Tree Medical Associates in Media, Pennsylvania, to learn more about the role of geriatricians, their philosophy towards care, and when seniors should see a geriatrician.

Dr. Shank said he was drawn to becoming a geriatrician because he was “impressed with the ability to change lives with attention to detail, using fewer medications, and taking problems seriously.” This philosophy concisely characterizes the special mission of geriatricians and their outlook towards care. That said, Dr. Shank explained that “not all seniors need to see a geriatrician, because primary care physicians are well trained in geriatrics.” But there are cases when seeing a doctor specializing in the needs of seniors and the nuances of their care can be warranted.

Dr. Shank outlined four reasons that seniors should consider seeing a geriatrician:

Medication Overload

Older adults can gradually accumulate so many prescriptions that the side effects can take a toll on their body and mind. In some cases, a senior may have been prescribed medications by multiple physicians without any one physician having a good understanding of the big picture, and how the medications are affecting the patient in combination. In other instances, a senior may experience memory loss which is mistaken for dementia with an organic cause, when in fact it is a medication side effect. Dr. Shank explained that, frequently, reducing medications is one of the most effective tools in his arsenal.

In Need of a Second Opinion

If you feel like your primary care physician is not taking your problems seriously or has dismissed your prospects for improvement because of your age, a geriatrician may be able to provide new insight into your condition, your care, and your prognosis. As Dr. Shank put it, “No matter how old you are, if you have a problem, you deserve some effort into putting it right, or explaining why it can’t be fixed.”

Cognitive Decline or Memory Loss

Dealing with cognitive decline associated with Alzheimer’s disease and other types of age-related dementia is a special challenge for physicians. Naturally, geriatricians will have had special experience caring for patients with dementia. If you or a loved one have been diagnosed with dementia or mild cognitive impairment, consider a geriatrician. Sometimes their “less is more” approach to medications can be beneficial to patients with these types of conditions.

Advice Regarding Caregiving and Long-term Care Options

Seniors who need help with activities of daily living (and their caregivers) are wise to seek the advice of a geriatrician. A geriatrician can help seniors determine how to maintain maximum independence, while also educating them about personal care options that may be available.

A Special Calling

Geriatricians tend to be a special breed of physician with a uniquely uplifting “bedside manner”. Dr. Shank noted that while geriatrics is not the most glamorous branch of medicine, the satisfaction he gets from improving elders’ lives makes it very much worthwhile.

Sadly, the low number of physicians entering geriatrics combined with a rapidly aging population means that there are not enough geriatricians in the U.S. to assure that every community is served. This holds especially true for remote rural areas. Fortunately, residents of our region have generally solid access to numerous caring geriatricians.

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