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Empowering Patients Through Self-Education

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With the Information Age in full swing and picking up speed everyday, it's essential that home health patients, prospective or otherwise, empower themselves by researching and understanding their rights as Medicare beneficiaries.

Unlike ever before, patients can exercise their autonomy through self-education by utilizing the thousands of healthcare resources available on- and offline. They no longer have to be subjected to the demands of their physicians. Instead, at the click of a mouse and from the comfort of home, patients and their families are able to conduct independent research to ensure the best and most appropriate choice of homecare agency, surgeon, primary physician, nursing facility, etc.

Do be cautious, however – not every website, article or medical journal can be considered credible and/or reliable. Combine an inaccurate, untrustworthy website with the possible bias of healthcare professionals, and the customary result is poor or misdirected decision-making on part of the patient.

One common mistake, for instance, is the widespread unawareness of home health, or at least the varying misconceptions of what it is, including commonly mistaking it for hospice. In most cases, clinics, doctors and hospitals are correct in their assessment of homecare agencies, but it's still very important for patients to conduct independent research avoid making these simple, yet common errors.

A quick visit to Medicare.gov, for example, clears up homecare misconceptions by informing the individual that agencies can only service patients whose conditions are improvable. Here and on other credible websites, such as CMS.gov, patients can also learn they're not required to use home health agencies recommended by their physicians. Information of this type is typically outlined in the Patient's Bill of Rights.

Patient Rights are in place to protect the patient and give them the right of choice. Not required to sign contracts, patients can freely select and switch agencies at whatever point and for whatever reason. Unfortunately, patients

aren't always aware of this, either because they're not properly informed by their physicians or they simply don't ask.

The best way to combat this problem is for patients to be familiar with their home health plan. For example, individuals with Medicare HMOs should know that these plans are typically contracted with several homecare agencies, so there's an impression they can choose from any of the in-network agencies. However, this isn't always the case. Although contracted, the agency can look for loopholes to deny a patient if their plan isn't as profitable.

Take for example Humana HMO, which pays an approximate rate of \$65/visit versus Medicare, which pays \$110/visit. It's obviously more profitable for agencies to take on Medicare patients than it is to accept insurances such as Humana. To be fair, there are insurances that pay like Medicare. Scott and White Senior Care out of Texas, has similar coverage to Medicare and therefore, patients under this plan are eligible for more benefits.

Whatever the circumstances, a patient should never feel coerced to settle for a less than ideal home health agency. With Medicare advocating for patient rights and access to free healthcare resources, patients have the tools to make well-informed decisions. Gone are the days of ignorance. Today, technology and information put the patient on the decision-making team where they can leverage their knowledge to ensure the best care possible every time.