

Growing Old in a New Age

Two Marin County Women are fighting the trend of isolating the elderly and in the process are changing the way we age.

By Mike Stillman

Deciding how to care for an elderly relative has become an increasingly stressful problem for adult children. As American families spread out across the country, an older generation of relatives has been left behind. When an aging parent's health begins to fail, rarely does either generation want to or perhaps, because of financial considerations, is able to leave their own geographical and chosen community in order to be closer and make care assistance easier. From a distance, many adult children patch together and manage a schedule of independent home care providers or feel that they have no choice but to move a parent into an assisted living or skilled nursing community—options which by their very nature tend to isolate the elderly from the larger community. But two women have started a company called Living Well Assisted Living at Home that they believe can change the way the elderly are cared for and will keep them where they belong; in their own homes and in our communities.

"I don't think it makes any sense whatsoever to take a segment of the population out of our communities," said Living Well C.E.O. and co-founder Dr. Tessa ten Tusscher, who sees no possible benefits from "age segregated cultures." "The longer you are on the planet the more individual you are, so by definition by the time you reach 65, 75, 85 you're more and more unique...it's fascinating," said Dr. ten Tusscher, "You have a completely diverse group of people, but our culture sees it as one collapsed thing of elders.... There's a big difference between being 65 and 95, its like 45 and 15."

However, caring for an elderly relative can be a fulltime job, and unfortunately many Americans live too far away or are too busy to provide adequate care. With stories of abuse and virus outbreaks within assisted living communities circulating in the media, many adult children are hesitant to send their parents to one of these communities, but in many cases, "the family and the older adults don't see another choice," said Living Well president and co-founder Dr. Doris Bersing. Unfortunately, reports on the quality-of-life in assisted living communities have all-too-often provided grim accounts of rampant alcoholism, poor relations amongst the inhabitants, depression, and an alarming rate of suicides. "The current model is broken," said Dr. Bersing.

And, perhaps more importantly, in most cases, nursing homes and retirement communities aren't appealing to the aged. According to a survey conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), 89% of retired people say they would prefer to live out the rest of their years in their own home, and that is exactly what Living Well allows senior citizens to do.

Dr.'s Bersing and ten Tusscher have created a company that provides a range of care options, assistance with daily activities and household needs, medical assistance, fitness and wellness courses, and opportunities for social interaction all based around maintaining an independent lifestyle for the elderly. Many of their fans and investors can attest to the veracity of the idea that it is a fabulous alternative to assisted living

communities or the “fractured care” that many adult children often end up cobbling together from near or distance locales.

Living Well Assisted Living at Home is currently working with clients in southern Marin and in San Francisco and provides a unique care plan for each of its clients based on their needs. The services they offer range from light personal and home care for active or slightly frail elders to close supervision and 24-hour care assistance for clients with dementia or severe memory impairment. Living Well is even creating a new paradigm for home care by including services to adapt the home to the changing physical needs of the senior and by including services that include new technologies that monitor safety at home in order to improve seniors’ quality-of-life and safe being.

Both Dr. Bersing and Dr. ten Tusscher have spent a good part of their careers providing care for seniors and studying the way that aging affects the body. “Because they’re living longer, older adults have more health concerns, its much more about managing a lot of chronic diseases,” said Dr. ten Tusscher.

If acute medical assistance is needed, a Living Well medical staff member will serve as a medical advocate and will accompany their client to the hospital to ensure they receive proper care. “Hospitals can be a dangerous place for the older adults,” Dr. ten Tusscher said. Dr. ten Tusscher once provided counseling to a woman who went into the emergency room due to a minor hip injury, and left the hospital blind in both eyes because she was ignored by doctors and nurses when she complained of not having her glaucoma or high blood pressure medicines. The disastrous result was that the woman’s blood pressure dramatically increased, hence affecting her glaucoma and causing irreversible blindness – a result that likely would not have happened had a medical advocate been there to look out for her best interests.

In hospitals the elderly are often forced into unnecessary, embarrassing situations. Placing all seniors in diapers, whether needed or not, is a practice often used to save staff time and is something which Living Well’s team will advocate against. “How you would feel if you were placed in diapers?” asked Dr. ten Tusscher.

By hiring a staff of experienced care providers, and by paying them at above the market rate, Living Well strives to set itself apart from other home care agencies. Most of these, according to Dr. Bersing, just keep their patients, “fed and dry.” Living Well offers a variety of services in addition to personal care, including optional monthly day trips, home maintenance, transportation, and even a 24-hour concierge service, which Dr. Bersing said can provide everything from oysters to ice cream in the middle of the night. It is individualized and special care attending to the very unique needs of elders. The combination of these services offers a choice to the elders and helps provide peace-of-mind to the family members who need to manage the care of their loved ones.

“The one-size-fits-all activities and programs for seniors needs to stop,” said Dr. Bersing. At Living Well, the staff always takes the personality of the individual into account when arranging personal assistance or setting up social activities.

Growing old is a process that, if each of us is lucky, we each will have to face, but the women who run Living Well don’t see why old age should change the way you live your life.