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Aging Well

To get a parent to the doctor, watch your bedside manner

—BY KELLY GREENE



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AS A CONTRIBUTING editor to medical journals, Marilyn Larkins knows a thing or two about health care. But try telling that to her mother.

"All my mother will do regularly is get a mammogram. She's 83 years old," says Ms. Larkins, who lives in New York and, like many adult children, makes many of her pleas to see a doctor to a parent living far away—in this case, Boca Raton, Fla.

It's been much the same for Molly Mettler, a consumer-health advocate for older patients and former chairwoman of the National Council on the Aging, a Washington group. "Every year, without fail," says Ms. Mettler, "I would tell my parents to be sure to get their flu vaccines. My dad would end up getting two, and my mom would wait for her doctor to tell her to get one, which he almost never did. After my now 20-plus years in older-adult health-care issues and my 20-plus years of offering unsolicited advice, my mom has finally gotten around to listening to the flu-vaccine message. The rest of the stuff is up for grabs."

Why won't parents listen to their adult children's advice about getting a physical, colonoscopy, blood-pressure check or anything else? The answer often boils down to this: When you start trying to tell parents what to do, no matter how good the intentions, you threaten their independence just when they're watching friends with illnesses have to give up theirs. So, they may fear that medical tests could unearth some condition requiring extensive treatment, making them weaker and forcing them to rely on you more.

Concern about parents who won't see a doctor as often as their adult children think they should is so common that a handful of social workers and therapists are making a career out of their attempts to help. But even many experts find it easier to dole out advice to other families than to make it work in their own. Here are some of the lessons they've learned:

DON'T JUMP THE GUN: Before you bring up such a touchy subject, says Joseph Ilardo, a clinical social worker in Scarsdale, N.Y., step back and think about these questions: "Have you been asked to intervene? And is there a real need for your parent to see the doctor immediately?"

From his own experience negotiating with his 94-year-old mother about various medical tests, Dr. Ilardo has learned that "things that may feel urgent to the adult child may not be objectively urgent." If you discover that your mother has never had a mammogram, don't try to bully her into seeing a doctor that instant. Instead, think through a few ways to talk to her about it that won't put her on the defensive.

If your parents are still relatively healthy and independent, the first step—before you even broach medical matters—may be to build stronger lines of communication. Many busy families let things slide over the years into "really superficial conversation," says Barbara Friesner of New York, who calls herself a generational coach and counsels adult children about dealing with their parents.

"Start talking about small subjects, and focus on an activity," she says. "Go through photo albums, labeling pictures, or clean out the attic together. That gives you a chance to ask, 'What was it like having Grandma living in the house? How did your mother deal with it?' It also helps you see issues, like memory loss, as they happen." Once you re-establish easy conversation, your parents may be more likely to open up about their health.

One caveat: E-mail has limited value in this process, Ms. Friesner says. It's a great add-on to regular phone calls and visits, but it can backfire when you're asking about doctors' appointments. "People can write, 'Oh, I went to the doctor and everything was fine.' In a conversation, you could say, 'Tell me about it. What happened?'"

EMPHASIZE YOUR WORRIES: Many counselors say that stressing how you are feeling can be key to motivating parents into action. Telling your parents, "You should go to the doctor," or "Why haven't you gotten that test?" could make them feel imposed upon, angry or defensive, says Dr. Ilardo. Instead, he says, try turning it around: "It would make me feel better if you would go to the doctor. It would put my mind at ease."

Don't be afraid to tell them everything you're feeling: Are you losing sleep over their problems? Are you worried that they won't be around to see your children grow up? Those are the messages that might spur them into action.

In fact, the best part about telling your parents about the impact of their problems on you is that "they might feel that if they do something, they can help you," says Stella Henry, director of a long-term care facility in Culver City, Calif. "It helps them go into parent mode."

Sometimes, it makes sense to enlist grandchildren to deliver the message, she adds. Ms. Henry watched a granddaughter ask her grandfather, who had been refusing to give up his car keys, to stop driving because she was worried about him and didn't want to lose him. It worked.

Cathryn Tobin, a pediatrician in Toronto, has found it effective to mention to her mother what she's worried about, suggest that she see a doctor, and then not say another word about it.

"Invariably, she will forget that I asked her to see a doctor," Dr. Tobin says. "But she won't forget the concern, and she'll set up an appointment on her own a few days down the road. I just need to be patient, and let her come to the decision on her own."

FIND THE RIGHT FIT: Your parents may have a good reason for not wanting to visit a particular doctor. The physician, for instance, could be disrespectful of older patients, says Dr. Ilardo. "Take the time to say something like this: 'Every time we say something about going to see Dr. Palmer, you're not happy about it. Is there something about him that makes you uncomfortable?'"

Dr. Tobin was frustrated with her father's refusal to go to the emergency room to have a problem treated until she finally asked him why he didn't want to go. He then explained that if he did so, he would lose his travel insurance, "and he just loved his traveling," she says. "Once that became clear, we were able to work around that."

You also may want to talk with your parents about the meaning of "doctor's orders," says Dr. Ilardo. His mother recently told him she wasn't planning to bring up incontinence problems at a coming doctor's appointment, because she worried what the doctor might make her do. But the son persuaded her to discuss the problem by pointing out that they could talk about it, and then she could decide for herself whether to accept the doctor's advice.

REMEMBER YOUR ROLE: It's important to keep in mind that you are still the child.

"You never become your parents' parent," says psychologist Carole Rothman, who wrote a book with Dr. Ilardo titled, "Are Your Parents Driving You Crazy?" She adds: "Mom and Dad will maintain those roles until the day they die, and the child who forgets this is going to make a mistake."

Dr. Ilardo asks for permission before offering his own mother any help, and lets her make her own choices. After his mother nearly fell while getting out of the tub a few years ago, he asked if he might look into installing grab bars for her. Then, he asked if he could show her a catalog. "I'm not doing anything without her involvement or consent," he says.

HANDLE WITH CARE: If you suspect dementia, an indirect approach may work best. If you even mention Alzheimer's disease, your parents probably will run in the opposite direction, says John Morley, director of geriatric medicine at Saint Louis University's School of Medicine. "The first thing the parent will think is, 'They're going to put me in an institution, and I'll never be the same.'"

Instead, focus on physical reasons for getting checked out, he advises. You might start by saying, "You're not as strong as you were." Or, if you feel you must focus on mental health, say, "I've heard there's a new drug that helps people remember things better. Maybe it's worth finding out if that would be worthwhile for you."

Adds Dr. Morley: "The worst thing you can do is pull somebody to the doctor's office and say, 'You're here because I thought you should come.'"

IF ALL ELSE FAILS: Here's a wake-up call. Julie Isphording, a former Olympic marathoner in Cincinnati, says her parents and their friends got serious about preventive tests after her 38-year-old sister was diagnosed with stage-four cancer in her colon, liver and stomach about six months ago.

"I know that fear isn't the most positive motivator, but it can do a lot of good," she says.

Before her sister's cancer, her family never talked about family medical history. "It wasn't a conversation you'd have around the dinner table, and now it is," she says. "It's, 'You've been on sleeping pills?' Or, 'What thyroid medication?' And my mother asks me questions as well." ■