

Bill and Alison: Struggling to stay afloat

Alison had been a nurse in her younger years, and while that had helped her cope with dementia when she was first diagnosed, it had become a problem as her condition progressed. Alison's nursing background meant that she was able to cover her deterioration during assessments; she knew just how to answer the questions. At 86 years old, she was still living with her husband Bill in their family home, but they needed a lot of support. She was participating in a day program and receiving assistance with homemaking, bathing, and medication from Home Care. Bill handled most of her daily care, and their four children frequently helped as well. Despite all of this, the family was barely managing.

Alison had recently been in and out of emergency a number of times for falls, dehydration, and hallucinations. She had also begun calling the police on Bill, thinking there was a stranger in her home when she failed to recognize him. It was clear that something needed to change, but the family wasn't in agreement on what. Two of the children thought that keeping Alison in the family home was impossible, while the remaining 2 children felt there must be a way to do it. This added considerably to Bill's distress, as he was entirely uncertain about what should happen next and had his own health problems to deal with.

One of the children, Victoria, finally decided that they needed some impartial and confidential advice, as the family doctor had been unable to make any headway on the family's disagreement or Alison's needs. After receiving a referral to the Dementia Advice Service from Health Link, the dementia nurse began investigating this complex situation. Recognizing that she would likely need to talk to other members of the family, the nurse first gave Victoria some suggestions and resources for getting her family on the same page and better managing Alison's hallucinations and day-to-day care. She strongly encouraged Victoria to book a geriatric assessment for Alison and to share the family's concerns about their mother's ability to cover her deterioration with the geriatric team. She offered to fax the Dementia Advice assessment to Home Care and Alison's doctor to help move the process along smoothly. Finally, the nurse gave her contact information to Victoria and suggest that Bill call in, if he was comfortable.

Bill agreed that talking to someone less involved in the situation would be a good idea. By the time he phoned the dementia nurse they had booked a geriatric assessment for Alison, but had not yet gone to it. The nurse commended him for taking this first step, and asked for his perspective on the situation. Bill revealed that he was exhausted and worried about his own health; but also extremely wary of living separately from his wife. The nurse assessed his mental health and caregiving stress, and determined that he was at risk in both areas; his stress was high and mental health shaky, though neither were critical. Given how much support he was already receiving, the nurse was concerned that Bill could be in trouble before he even knew it, and asked to fax her assessment to the geriatric team that would be doing Alison's assessment. She explained in more detail what might be involved in placing Alison in Long Term Care or Supportive Living to ease some of his concerns about being separated, and also relayed

the suggestions she had given to Victoria. Lastly, she offered to follow-up with him after Alison's appointment, and he gratefully agreed.

The next time the nurse check in with him, Bill informed her that Alison's assessment had qualified her for placement in Supportive Living, where Home Care would continue to assist her. The dementia nurse's support had contributed to this outcome and helped to get the family on the same page, and everyone was now in agreement that this was the best solution. Though sad that he would no longer be living with his wife, Bill felt relieved that she would be getting the right care and was feeling less upset. When the dementia nurse phoned back one last time to see how Alison was doing in her new home, Bill told her how incredibly grateful he was for all of her help. Alison was settling well, he visited her almost every day, and he no longer worried about her safety. He had even begun spending more time with his old army buddies. Bill felt more like himself than he had in a long time.