Too Many Cookies

James E. Lett, II, MD, CMD, with Wayne Saltsman, MD, PhD, CMD

I believe the answer is to assess our patients to determine their level of ability to understand and implement discharge instructions, as proposed by Jackie Vance, RNC, BSN, my friend, colleague, and former staffer with AMDA — The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine. Doing so allows the discharging entity to determine the best avenue to effectively craft a discharge plan that is not only appropriate but can actually be implemented by the patient. What would such an evaluation look for? Here are some thoughts:

• Is any sensory impairment present (inability to hear, see, speak, etc.)?
• Can the patient read?
• What is the patient’s health literacy level?
• Does the patient use English as a second language?
• Does the patient have cognition, memory, or judgment issues? (This would include such problems as dementia disease, delirium, mental health issues, and substance abuse.)
• Can the patient provide self-care? If not, how is care to be provided?
• Does the patient have the financial resources to purchase medications and medical equipment or meet other discharge medical needs?
• In any transitioning patient with the type of concerns listed here, will family or a caregiver be present at the time the instructions are provided?
• Can the discharge instructions be provided by a single person, summarizing all instructions?

Part of the discharge/transition process should always include an assessment of the patient’s (or surrogate’s) understanding of the instructions. Preferably this assessment should include a teach-back or similar aspect to ensure that the patient or surrogate can articulate the critical elements of the instructions.

Informed, engaged patients and families are at the heart of good transitions. So let us consider not only the number and type of cookies we provide to our transitioning patients but also the size and characteristics of the cookie jar we use as our discharge instructions.

Dr. Lett is a Society past president, past chair of the Society’s Transitions of Care Committee, and previous editor of this column. Dr. Saltsman (pictured above) is the section chief of geriatrics and transitional care for Lahey Health, Burlington, MA. He is the chair of the Society’s Transitions of Care Committee.