Monitor Your Elderly Parent’s Home Care? 
There’s an App for That

By Robert Nascenzi
With adults age 85 and over the fastest growing segment in the U.S., the demand for assisted living continues to grow at an astounding clip. The dilemma is that such demand is over-burdening existing healthcare resources with more and more seniors preferring to receive care in their own homes. As a result, family caregivers and for-hire homecare providers are looking for tools to streamline and support their caregiving activities that at the same time help reduce emergency room visits and hospital readmissions.

Thankfully, mobile electronic home care management is no longer futuristic. A mobile device can be a platform to help solve this growing problem. Applications are currently in development that will facilitate continuous health and wellness tracking as well as in-home care and family remote monitoring for seniors and disabled adults. Through the use of a tablet or smartphone, homecare providers can wirelessly collect case management information such as client mobility, weight, pulse, and blood pressure. At the same time, software programs can record and track a host of other data such as when the client last ate, what kind of mood they’re in, if they took their medications, and the date and time of their next doctor’s appointment. Family members will be able to check the health status of their loved-one through a web-based interface and send notes to the caregiver as needed.

The key to making these applications useful is to closely examine the pain points currently facing in-home caregivers. To be most effective, such applications must be easy to use and provide open, effortless communication that is non-intrusive to the person receiving care, while also providing peace of mind to remote concerned parties. All involved need to know that critical tasks are being attended to and their loved one’s well-being is being maintained. Here are some key features that these types of applications should have in order to truly provide value in the new technology-based world of caregiving coordination.

Appointment Scheduler, Calendar, and Reminders
Managing the appointment schedule for an individual receiving care can be extremely challenging. An essential feature for any mobile application supporting in-home caregiving activities is a scheduling tool that allows the caregiver to organize and track activities such as physician appointments, deliveries, and birthdays. One key element in helping the elderly maintain a positive disposition is helping them feel in control of their surroundings and schedule. This reduces a feeling of confusion and panic that many seniors face when they feel helpless, and it is one of the most important jobs of those who look after loved ones.

Caregiver Check-In/Time Keeping
Remote family members should have the ability to know who is with their loved one at any given time. With a mobile check-in feature, family members can see in real-time when a caregiver arrives at their loved-one’s home. This ensures a high degree of accountability and coordination between everyone involved in looking after an elderly person. It also removes paper-based timesheets and can be used for payroll purposes.

Key Contact List
Contact information is critical in supporting caregiving activities. It’s a common occurrence to have only one or two individuals possess all the necessary information for both emergent and non-critical activities. A mobile application can offer that information to all authorized personnel. The client’s key contacts, such as close family members, physicians, nurses, and pharmacies, can be stored and accessed at a moment’s notice by the caregiver and remote family members.

Dashboards and Report Generation
Most information on a person under care is documented in reams of paper that is passed to family members and medical personnel sporadically and often incompletely. Mobile device applications can solve this problem by summarizing the status of the client’s overall well-being through a dashboard that is accessible by caregivers and remote family members to obtain key information on the individual at a glance. The information presented in a graphic-friendly way can also rate the client’s overall health and mood on a daily basis, so family members and caregivers can quickly identify trends and issues before they become significant.

Personal health reports should be available on-demand to ensure thorough historical information can be reported to concerned parties when needed. It should also be possible to receive reports automatically via email on a set time schedule.

Errand Tracking
It’s very common for tasks to fall through the cracks because those involved assumed someone else has taken care of them. The mobile application should have a feature that allows individuals to enter and assign everyday errands, such as grocery shopping, prescription pick-up, cleaning, and laundry for everyone to see. Once complete, the caregiver or family member can check off the task.
Encrypted Lock Box

Just like important contact information, key documents such as insurance policies, bank accounts, wills, and other materials are held in places that only a few individuals know. Scanning and centralizing this information on a mobile application would enable faster access in case of an emergency by authorized family members and caregivers. The information can be stored behind an encrypted username and password to ensure privacy and security for the client.

Collaboration Portal

Overall coordination and communication between remote family members and caregivers is one of the biggest challenges faced by in-home care. This feature would allow family members and caregivers to communicate in real-time through messaging and audio or video chat in a secure environment. This is especially important when issues arise, such as a sudden change in the individual’s health status or unexpected family needs. It also provides an excellent way to keep regular communication lines open between all parties.

Meal Planning and Tracking

Nutritional needs are important for anyone but particularly so for elderly needing to keep their strength up and mind sharp. The mobile application should be capable of developing meal plans based on the client’s dietary and medical needs, tracking the individual’s actual consumption of the food, and recording food preferences and allergies.

Prescription Medicine Information

In the same way the dashboard feature would allow caregivers and family members to view the health status of a client, this feature could track the individual’s prescription medication including dosage, whether it should be taken with food, and when refills should be ordered. It should also include reminders of when the client must take their medication, automatically notifying family members and caregivers if a scheduled dosage is missed. Any changes in medication should also send an alert message to appropriate people and outline any potential side effects, so they can anticipate erratic changes in health or behavior of the client.

Environment and Vital Signs Monitoring

This feature could enable tracking of simple metric data through the use of wireless sensors. This includes metrics such as mobility, weight, blood pressure, and glucose levels. Additionally, the application could provide information on the environmental conditions of the individual’s location, including detection of smoke, open doors, and high or low air temperatures. The application should allow for customizable, automatic alerts to send notifications to caregivers and family members.

Of course, this kind of mobile application technology may stir up fears of data privacy and security, Big Brother, and medical liability, all of which are legitimate policy issues that need to be considered. These concerns can be mitigated by putting the control of information in the hands of a select group of family members, caregivers, and the clients themselves to ensure who, where, and how such information is disseminated. One thing is for certain: Technology and innovation are swiftly pioneering new ground in healthcare. In-home services are no exception, though often overlooked. By focusing on continued development and implementation of mobile in-home care applications we can improve the quality of life for seniors while reducing the cost of their care.

About the Author: Robert Nascenzi is president and CEO of nliven, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Humana.