At Too Many Hospitals, A Revolving Door

Judith Graham

Jessie Gruman can't remember the number of times she's been hospitalized for cancer. The list of the conditions she's had over almost 40 years is daunting: from Hodgkin's lymphoma to cancers of the cervix and lung.

But Ms. Gruman, 59, can't forget her experience three years ago, when it was time to leave the hospital after having her stomach removed, a consequence of gastric cancer.

Ms. Gruman was alone; her husband was on his way to this hospital but hadn't yet arrived. This is all she remembers a nurse saying before she was shown the door.

Here is a prescription for pain medication. Don't drive if you take it. Call your surgeon if you have a temperature or are worried about anything. Go see your doctor in two weeks. Do you want a flu shot? I can give you one before you leave. If you need a wheel chair to take you to the door, I'll call for one. If not, you can go home. Take care of yourself. You are going to do great!

What wasn't communicated to Ms. Gruman: Here's a number to call if you have any questions. Here's the medical expert who's in charge of your follow-up care and how to reach him or her. Here's the plan for your care over the next month, and here's the plan for the next six months.

Or this: You're going to experience a lot of challenges when you get home. Here are the three or four concerns that should be your priorities. Here's what your caregiver needs to know to help you most effectively. Here are resources in the community that might be of assistance.

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