

Transitional care helps patient return to health — and home

Carl Sutton often jokes about his “bucket list” — the things he wants to do before he dies.

“Being dead is not on that list!” says Sutton, a good-humored 75-year-old from Cody, Wyo. “Neither is living in a nursing home.”

But last spring, those looked like his only options.

Sutton says he began feeling “punk” during the last week of March 2011. His feet had swollen two sizes, and he’d lost interest in eating. Then came a day when he couldn’t get out of his chair. His wife took him to the local hospital. When doctors couldn’t figure out what was causing his symptoms, Sutton was transferred to a larger hospital in Billings, Mont. Doctors there were also stumped.

“Then some smart cookie called Mayo Clinic,” says Sutton. “Mayo said, ‘Put him on an airplane and get him here now.’”

A Mayo MedAir air ambulance brought Sutton to Saint Marys Hospital in Rochester, where he underwent more testing.

“They put me through every test or scan they could think of, and I think they invented a few,” says Sutton, who finally received a diagnosis of polyarteritis nodosa. The condition causes the vessels and arteries to become inflamed, which limits their ability to effectively transport blood throughout the body. If not detected and treated, the condition can lead to organ damage.

By the time Sutton was diagnosed, his kidney and colon were already damaged, forcing doctors at Mayo Clinic to remove a kidney and part of his colon. Sutton’s weight plummeted to less than 90 pounds.

Occupational therapist Keith Kaiser, right, and physical therapist Curt Beissel, left, worked daily with Carl Sutton to help him regain the strength and function he would need to return home to Wyoming after a lengthy hospitalization at Mayo Clinic.



“I was nothing but skin and bones,” says Sutton, who weighed close to 145 pounds before his illness. “The doctors weren’t sure I would even survive. But they didn’t know Wyoming people. We’re survivors.”

On the road to recovery

Gradually, Sutton’s health began to improve. He began putting on weight, and when he reached 98 pounds was transferred to the transitional care program at Mayo Clinic Health System in Cannon Falls. The program provides patients with 24-hour nursing care, meals and physical and occupational therapy. A physician monitors each patient’s care and coordinates any additional therapy the patient may need. Social workers, dietitians and pharmacists round out the team.

“We work together with Mayo Clinic staff to develop a plan of care for each patient that comes into our program,” says Curt Beissel, a physical therapist. “Transitional care ensures continuity of care throughout a patient’s healing process.”

When Sutton arrived in Cannon Falls, he couldn’t walk, talk or feed himself. Beissel and Keith Kaiser, an occupational therapist, immediately began working to change that.

“Initially we worked on simple range-of-motion exercises with Carl while he was lying in bed, with the goal of moving toward seated activities,” says Beissel. “He made progress every day, and within two weeks he was able to stand. Once he could stand, it was like someone lit a fire under him.”

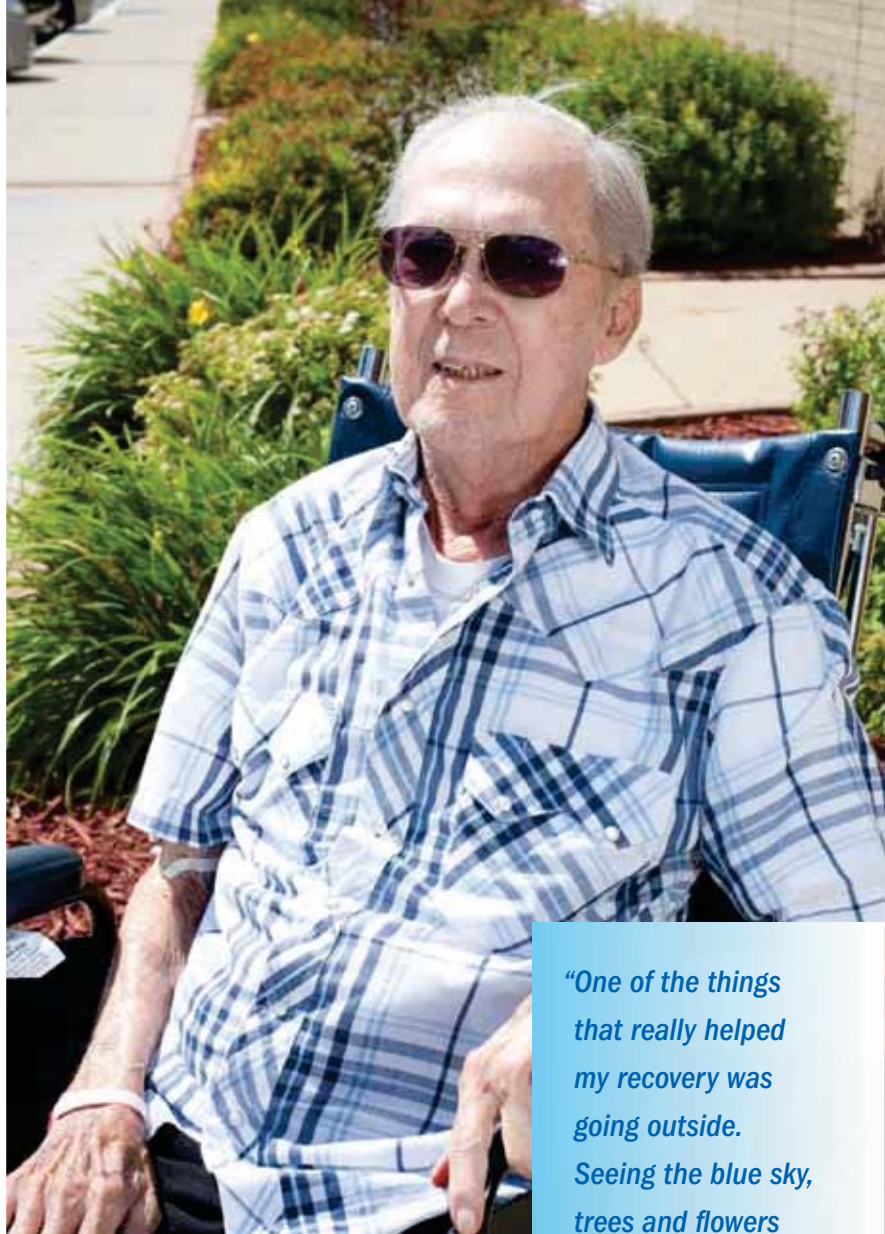
Soon after Sutton stood, Beissel and Kaiser helped him take his first steps in over two months.

“That was a big, big deal,” remembers Sutton. “Once I got those two steps I could see that I could do more.”

Beyond physical therapy

Six days a week, Sutton “did more” in three-hour therapy sessions with Beissel, Kaiser and their colleagues. The team worked to strengthen Sutton’s muscles, improve his balance and coordination and reintroduce him to activities of daily living such as eating and getting dressed.

In addition to helping Sutton recover physically, they helped heal his spirit. Beissel and Kaiser learned that Sutton had a deep love of the outdoors. So one day after a therapy session, they asked Sutton if he’d like to go outside. The answer



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Carl Sutton

was a resounding “yes,” which led to daily trips outside the medical center.

“One of the things that really helped my recovery was going outside,” says Sutton. “Seeing the blue sky, trees and flowers was such a big change from looking at four white walls all day. Keith teased me that by going outside I was getting my batteries charged, and that I ran about 50 percent on solar energy.”

Kaiser and Beissel also teased Sutton about his Wyoming roots, about being a cowboy — or anything else they thought would make him smile.

“We believe humor is a game-changer in rehab,” says Kaiser. “Humor and laughter can help change a patient’s mindset about their

continued on page four

continued from page three

illness, which can change the direction of their therapy and healing. Humor plays a big part in motivating patients. If we can motivate the mind and attitude, the body will follow.”

Sutton appreciated the efforts taken to make him smile.

“Curt and Keith kept me so happy,” says Sutton. “They both have a tremendous sense of humor. Laughter is therapy just as much as physical therapy. You can’t feel lousy when you’re laughing. I had so many down days, and their humor helped lift me up on those days.”

True caring

Sutton said the care center’s nursing staff also helped him maintain a positive attitude.

“The nurses don’t get paid for giving encouragement, affinity and validation, but they sure gave it to me,” says Sutton. “One gal there, when I was feeling down, she wrapped me up in her arms and just held me. That helped so much.”

Members of the nursing staff also bought new clothes for Sutton, who had come to Minnesota alone and with nothing but the hospital gown he wore when he left Wyoming. Housekeeping staff took Sutton’s clothes home in the evening to wash them. Staff also provided Sutton with luggage, new tennis shoes and the Louis L’Amour novels that he loves to read. They made a videotape of Sutton’s progress to share with his wife, Donna, who was unable to be in Minnesota during Sutton’s hospitalization and recovery.

“We try to treat all of our patients with care and tenderness,” says Kaiser. “We go above and beyond to meet their needs. We want to take the hospitalization out of their hospital stay.”

The effort worked for Sutton, who says staff in Cannon Falls “spoiled me, big time.”

Still, Sutton’s goal was to return home. And on Aug. 11, after two and a half months of

therapy in Cannon Falls and four and a half months in Minnesota, Sutton boarded a plane and flew back to his life in Wyoming.

“The people in Cannon Falls were fabulous, but home is where I wanted to be,” says Sutton. “I was euphoric to get back.”

Though he’s out of sight, Sutton isn’t out of mind among his caregivers in Cannon Falls. He exchanges weekly e-mails with Kaiser and Beissel, and the three are planning a reunion in fall 2012.

“Carl’s bucket list includes pheasant hunting in North Dakota, and Keith is coordinating a hunting trip there for the three of us,” says Beissel. “We told Carl he needs to weigh 140 pounds if he wants to come, and he’s already up to 129.6. We continue to try to motivate him from 1,200 miles away.”

Sutton is deeply grateful for their efforts.

“The people at Saint Marys saved my life, but the people in Cannon Falls gave me my life back,” says Sutton. “I love those people and really miss them.”

Kaiser and Beissel provided more than therapy during Sutton’s recuperation. They were also a source of emotional support, and developed a friendship with Sutton that continues today.

