

Providing care challenging and rewarding

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For The Daily Gleaner

Elaine Gaudet paints an amazing picture of herself, taking off socks and shoes, rolling up her pant legs and stepping into a bathtub full of water to pull an elderly lady out of the tub.

[Enlarge Photo](#)



James West Photo

Elaine Gaudet, a home support worker for Brunswick Home Care Ltd., right, spends some time talking to Glenna Drost while at Drost's home in Fredericton recently.

It's a true story and just one of the many things Gaudet, a home support worker, will do in caring for her elderly clients.

In another incident she had a male client who had a stroke and lost his ability to speak. She served him a sandwich one day and he threw it at her.

"I didn't know he didn't like margarine," laughed Gaudet.

By way of an apology, when she went to visit the next day, he handed her a loaf of bread to take home.

Gaudet is employed with Brunswick Home Care Ltd. and has been a home support worker for 23 years.

It began with her own mother who developed Hodgekin's disease.

She cared for her mother for five years until her death.

From there she was asked by a neighbour to care for a woman with Alzheimer's and eventually she went to work for a home care company.

All of this was with no formal training and just learning on the job. Gaudet was OK with that until one day she had a scare.

A male client who had both heart problems and diabetes complained of having stomach pain and weakness. She was about to get him a heart pill when she decided she should stop and check his blood sugar level first. His sugar level was high.

"If I had given him the heart pill maybe I might have killed him," said Gaudet.

After that she decided she needed some formal training.

She enrolled at New Brunswick Community College, and completed a one-year geriatric aide course.

Gaudet has worked for Brunswick Home Care for nine years.

Her clients range in age from 40 to the late 80s. They have a wide range of health problems and disabilities, from dementia and Alzheimer's to heart problems, physical disabilities or just weakness due to old age.

She visits four to five clients a day. In a short two-hour visit she will do some housework, vacuuming and cleaning, prepare a meal, which may require knowledge of special diets, and depending on the time of day, give baths, assist in dressing clients, assist with insulin shots and remind them to take their medications.

Each client has different needs. Some are bedridden so the home care worker may have to lift them to sit in a wheelchair or go out in a car, or assist them getting in and out of the bathtub.

Patients who are able to go out will need to be taken shopping and to appointments.

From stories of experiences with clients, you may realize this is not a job for the squeamish or the faint of heart.

It can involve cleaning up after an incontinent patient.

Or, in palliative care, the body of the deceased may need to be washed down and prepared for the funeral home.

While all of these tasks are necessary for proper care of the client, what many value the most is the social interaction.

About 80 per cent of clients live alone and some may have little contact with the outside world except for the home support worker.

It's a job that requires a lot of empathy and sensitivity, said Evelyn Fox, the manager at Brunswick Home Care.

Having a stranger bathe and dress them can be embarrassing for clients at first.

Humour and just chatting about something else helps them get over the awkwardness, said Gaudet and Fox, who also worked in the field with clients for eight years.

Step by step they have to build a trust with the client until they feel comfortable with them, said Fox.

“And when they really trust you and like you, then they want you there every day,” added Gaudet.

Workers can become close to their clients and have difficulty when they lose a client to a nursing home or to death.

Fox said the home support workers need to learn coping skills to deal with the emotional side of their jobs.

Home support workers also work closely with social workers and extra-mural nurses involved with the same clients.

Fox oversees the work of 25 to 30 employees. She said it takes kind, caring and compassionate people and someone who really likes looking after the elderly to last at the job.

“You’ve really got to want to be there. The sick, the dying, the elderly, they feel it when you want to be there. You won’t last long if you don’t really want to be there,” said Fox.

“It’s a passion and anything you are passionate about you’re good at. Some people are just born caregivers.”

Money is certainly not going to be a motivator because the salaries are low, about \$8 to \$10 an hour. Some work seven days a week to make enough to live on, said Fox. Most workers wages are paid by the provincial Social Development Department unless clients can afford to hire privately.

Women seem to take to the job more naturally than men, although in the past Fox’s company has employed a couple of men.

No specific training or education is required, although Brunswick Home Care has begun introducing its own training program, most of it delivered by correspondence so its staff can continue to work while they study, said Fox.

Fox sees a crunch coming as the baby boomers age and the number of home care workers fails to increase.

“We are not going to be able to attract young people when they can make more money at Tim Hortons and not have the responsibility they have working at this job. So I hope somebody gets it soon,” said Fox.