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The Home as Hospital: Family Caregivers and High Tech Healthcare Offloading

The shift of high-tech medical care from hospital to home has been one of the most pronounced trends in health care over past two decades. The offloading of high-tech care from hospitals to families is especially paradoxical in that it represents a reversal in the long-term trend of moving medical care out of the home and into public institutions: for the first time, a form of care that has been thoroughly professionalized and bureaucratized is being transferred from formal institutions back into families, where in many cases, there is no one home to do the work. In the high-tech home care setting, friends and family members administer IV medication, operate respiratory ventilators and respiratory suction, perform kidney dialysis, and supply feeding tubes, after only a handful of teaching visits from a Visiting Nurse. Being enlisted to care creates strains on relationships and places burdens on individuals who may not have been prepared to take on such responsibilities. Unlike paid caregivers, family members generally lack adequate training to operate the machinery, watch for side effects and malfunctions, or cannot communicate with doctors in the medical language that would help physicians to respond adequately to caregiver concerns. Based on interviews with family caregivers, his paper explores how family life changes when the hospital comes home.