



April 19, 2009

Lee County aims to solve epidemic of falls

Avoidable injuries, deaths: county numbers highest in state

By *DAN WARNER*
dwarner@news-press.com

The saddest part is that they probably didn't have to die.

Not the two women, one 83, the other 90, who died on the same July day from complications of broken hips. Not the two men in their 40s who fell from great heights. Not the 93-year-old woman who died from head injuries after a series of falls.

They ranged in age from 40 to 98. The vast majority — 27 of the 33 — were 70 and older.

They all were victims of injuries suffered in falls — mostly simple household tumbles — handled by the Lee County Medical Examiner's Office last year. And they're an extension of a local epidemic that exploded beyond anyone's wildest expectations a year earlier — in 2007 — and in two days will become the focus of a gigantic public health campaign.

Those startling 2007 statistics showed that falls had catapulted ahead of auto crashes as the leading cause of injury deaths in Lee County.

Lee leads the state in fall deaths by a margin of more than 2-1.

There were 144 fall deaths in Lee County in 2007, the latest year for which information is available. They compare to 106 deaths from motor vehicle crashes.

The county's fall death rate that year was 23.2 per 100,000 people, compared to the state rate of 9.1.

The effort to cut deaths due to falls, primarily among the elderly, is being launched by the Lee County Injury Prevention Coalition and an array of health and safety agencies ranging from the sheriff's office to the Lee Memorial Health System to the Area Agency on Aging.

Delegates from those groups will meet in what it is calling a Fall Summit at 1 p.m. Tuesday in the conference room of The News-Press, to approve a fall prevention strategic plan the group began to develop at a previous meeting of 74 delegates in November. The plan will outline specific actions to take to reduce the number of falls.

"Don't talk about accidents," said Dr. Judith Hartner, head of the Lee County Health Department. "We want people to understand that falls are preventable."

Joyce Parker, a busy, bustling 80-year-old Sunday school teacher from Buckingham, has learned that lesson and has taken a big step - no pun intended - to assure that she doesn't become a serious fall victim.

"I have always fallen a lot," the retired school teacher said. "And then when I had two falls so close together I decided I had to do something."

Parker fell March 1 at her church after tripping over a purse while hurrying to start her class and then three weeks later at home, again while rushing.

Both falls gave her serious facial injuries and many bruises. Worst, perhaps, the falls were embarrassing. She missed a week of church because she looked so bad "I was afraid I would scare people."

A friend referred her to the balance clinic run by the Lee Memorial Health System at its Rehabilitation and Wellness Center on Carrell Street.

There, balance specialist and physical therapist Nathalie Grondin put Parker through a series of evaluations, confirming what Parker suspected: that her feet weren't always getting the proper messages from her brain.

Grondin gave Parker a series of strategies to get around the problem and, after just three visits, Parker said "it has helped me already."

"I am beginning to compensate to the point where I feel more competent," she said. "I think before I step."

"And," she said, "I get up every morning and ask the Lord to help me not to run today."

The full statistics for deaths due to falls in 2008 are not yet in - just the falls handled by the medical examiner, who sees only about half the cases, have been compiled - but it appears that the 2007 record was not repeated. Cases handled by the medical examiner are down by about half.

The two leading fatal injuries due to falls in 2008 were hip fractures and blows to the head - the latter being the injury that shocked the nation last month when actress Natasha Richardson fell on a beginner's ski slope in Quebec, Canada, and died from injuries that at first did not seem to be serious.

Nobody can pinpoint the reason Lee County's incidence of fall deaths is so much higher than the rest of the state, except to suggest its large elderly population is to blame.

But that suggestion doesn't hold up when you weigh the death rate according to age as the Florida Department of Health did. That weighted chart still showed Lee's death rate at twice the state average.

Why Lee's rate is so much higher is unimportant when you consider that falls can be prevented and that they are so devastating, said Dr. Lowell Gerson of Estero, chairman of the Injury Prevention Coalition.

"Falls are an unrecognized and significant cause of pain, suffering, death and money," he said. "And they are preventable."

The realization that falls can be prevented "is the painful part of this whole picture," said Mark Tesoro, a member of the coalition's board of directors.

"Falling is not a natural, normal part of aging," he said. "I think we are going to bring those numbers down with a community-wide strategic plan."

Lee EMS paramedic Joe Coulter sees the fall problem firsthand. He is stationed in the Iona area of south Fort Myers, home to many elderly people, and is frequently called to aid fall victims.

He recalls one in particular, a woman who lives alone, is diabetic and often gets dizzy and falls.

"We come out and put her back in bed," he said. "I have been to her place five, six times in a month. She won't move to where she can have help because she doesn't want to leave her little dog.

"We find people who have been on the floor for days. It is bad."

Coulter said he is seeing more bad injuries because many people are now using tile floors rather than carpeting.

He said many seniors are subject to falls because they "don't know when to move on to the next step in their lives - when to move into assisted living facility or a nursing home."

"People need to take an accurate inventory of their abilities," agreed Tesoro. Such an inventory is difficult for many to undertake, he said, "because people are more afraid of losing their individuality."

The falls that don't result in death often cause serious ongoing health problems.

Michael Marcus, who manages the trauma program at Lee Memorial, said that 2.9 percent of fall victims in 2007 and 2008 who came through his department died. Of the elderly, that percentage rose to 3.75.

But of the survivors, only 21 percent went straight home. The others were admitted to the hospital, sent to hospice care or went to some rehabilitation facility.

"Falls are a devastating injury because you take a functional person and all of a sudden they are bed-bound," Marcus said. "It is a catastrophe in terms of daily living."

Additional Facts

If you go
