Home health: giving the gift of confidence

By Chris Gessele

Hindered by severe pain in his hip and back, Elden Zuern would usually seek out the nearest bench in the mall to sit and wait for his wife, Norma, to finish her shopping. That was then; this is now. “Now, I wear her out,” Elden proudly declared.

Elden, 83, and Norma live on a farmstead north of Hazen. Living in the country requires building maintenance and many hours of mowing grass and moving snow. In addition to those never-ending chores, Elden also preaches the first Sunday of each month at St. Paul Lutheran Church as well as guest-preaches at other area churches and provides counseling for a vast array of matters.

Hip and back pain, however, had him recently wondering how long he could keep up his current level of activity. His doctor found he had no cartilage left in his left hip joint and suggested hip replacement surgery. Elden went under the knife Sept. 15. On a scale of 1-10, the surgery reduced his pain from a 25 to a 2.

“Last month, I was wondering how much longer I could do it... but here I am, ready to go again. What a difference it is now.”

To get to that point, however, Elden needed the help of Sakakawea Medical Center’s Home Health Care services. In honor of November as National Home Care and Hospice Month, Elden recalled the difference care at home made for him.

Home Health provides occupational therapy, physical therapy, nursing, social work and speech therapy services to patients. They can also provide tools to make life easier and safer for their patients, such as canes, walkers, wheelchairs, shower benches and toilet extenders. In a busy month, Home Health will have eight patients admitted for varying lengths of time.

Elden returned home from the hospital on Sept. 17 and began receiving care at home on Sept. 18. According to SMC Home Health director Jennifer Wolff, a patient must be home-bound, have a skilled need and be referred by a doctor. Patients could be recovering from an injury, in need of wound care, or as in Elden’s case recovering from surgery.

An occupational therapist helped Elden with activities of daily living such as showering and getting dressed, as well as learning to do little things like carrying food while using a walker and picking up things without stooping. A physical therapist also prescribed Elden exercises to help build up strength in his hip and surrounding muscles.

Elden is used to being busy. The Zuerns, both Mercer County natives, spent 43 years in Massachusetts where he worked as a juvenile court chaplain, probation officer and hospital chaplain. He has also been involved in the Masonic Lodge, Shriners, Lions Club, and does counseling “of nearly any nature,” from anger issues to marital and youth. He retired from ministry in 2001 and in 2002 moved with Norma, but still keeps busy counseling and preaching at area churches.

While recovering from his surgery, Elden wasn’t allowed to do many activities that people tend to take for granted, such as drive or even crossing his legs. One thing in particular Elden missed was his four-wheeler, which he takes to get his mail every day, he said.

As the week went on, Elden became increasingly independent until he was able to fully care for himself. Home Health stopped visiting him on Sept. 25. “You have to be able to take care of yourself before we let you go,” Jennifer said. “He was a model patient. He did what was asked of him, was involved in his own care and healed well.”

Elden was back at the pulpit by Oct. 6, and once again riding his four-wheeler to and from his mailbox. He is grateful for his recovery, and credited Home Health for playing an important role in that recovery.

“I felt very comfortable. They did everything I needed or expected,” Elden said. “I think this is very important for people’s rehabilitation. They made me more confident in what I was doing.”

Elden Zuern, front row far right, with the Sakakawea Home Health staff who aided him in his recovery from surgery - front row: R.N. Wanda Etzel. Back row from left: office coordinator Sheila Hildebrand and director Jennifer Wolff. For more information about Home Health, call 748-7380.