

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

National Nursing Home Week: Can Industry Growth Be Supported?

From May 11-17, the U.S. celebrated National Nursing Home Week. The American Health Care Association established the week-long celebration in 1967; during the week activities in nursing homes sought to foster intergenerational relationships, collect and preserve patient's reminiscences, strengthen relationships with family members, celebrate quality and recognize staff members who demonstrate excellent care giving.

In theory such activities are great, because according to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), there are more than 1.7 million nursing home beds in the U.S. (108,000 of which are in New England). In practice, though, two things happened in Washington, D.C. during National Nursing Home Week that revealed several threats to the quality of care in our nation's nursing homes.

In a Congressional hearing on May 15, lawmakers probed problems in America's nursing homes and questioned whether federal monitoring systems of nursing homes are overlooking deficiencies that threaten patients' health. The hearing, entitled "In the Hands of Strangers," came the same day a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that nursing home inspectors regularly ignore or underreport serious problems and health risks.

We all know that our nation is growing older. The percentage of the population 75 years of age and older was 6% in 2005 and is projected to increase to 12% by 2050. With an aging population and longer life expectancy comes increasing total prevalence of chronic diseases and conditions associated with aging, such as disability and limitation of activity.

Folks, I'm concerned. If government monitoring of nursing homes is lackluster and nursing home inspectors have a cavalier attitude towards serious problems and health risks, that speaks volumes about the quality of care our loved ones receive in nursing homes. If someone you love is in a nursing home, I strongly recommend you diligently monitor the quality of their care.

Nursing homes are big business, and business is booming. As of 2004, the NCHS reports that the average monthly per resident charge across all nursing home facilities is \$5,690. You don't need to be a mathematician to understand that serious money is at stake in the nursing home industry.

At least our lawmakers understand this: At the hearing they questioned whether changing ownership trends in the nursing home industry have resulted in less regulatory transparency and poorer service quality. Too bad it's taken them 20 years to do so!

The last time Congress updated nursing home regulations was in 1987. Since then, "the nursing home industry has radically changed," said Rep. John D. Dingell (D-MI), the

Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. “Nursing homes are an industry with new investors and new financing and ownership structures. This new dynamic raises serious questions about whether profits are being placed before the needs of nursing home residents.”

To paraphrase President Eisenhower: “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the nursing home industrial complex.”

I’ve spent my career in the health care field. I can tell you that *any* health care standards developed twenty years ago to provide an appropriate level of care and protection for nursing home residents are no longer applicable.

We don’t need National Nursing Home Week to realize that the nursing home industry has in many ways outgrown the regulations meant to protect the most vulnerable among us. We need new standards—especially more transparency in how private companies own and operate nursing homes.

In my experience, less transparent nursing homes usually have an obvious lack of personal contact which turns into a lack of personal care and concern. There seems to be a detachment from the purpose and mission of a nursing home, which should be to take care of the most vulnerable population: the elderly and physically and mentally disabled.

I’m not saying that *all* nursing homes are run like businesses. In fact, I’ve worked with and in several excellent facilities in our community. I know many of the staff in these facilities and they lovingly care for their residents.

I am saying that we shouldn’t be taken in by smooth PR campaigns like National Nursing Home Week—we owe it to our loved ones and ourselves to explore *all* viable options when it comes to caring for our aging population.

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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