

Careful Research Can Help You Avoid Choosing a Substandard Nursing Home

Nursing home abuse has become far too common. Earlier this year, California's Attorney General Jerry Brown announced the arrest of several nursing home employees who had allegedly overmedicated patients "for [the] staff's convenience."

<http://www.ag.ca.gov/newsalerts/release.php?id=1682&> Stated differently, prosecuting attorneys believe the arrested employees were ignoring patients' cries for help (due to physical pains or dementia's anguishing symptoms) and simply overmedicating them into states of silence and oblivion.

As Attorney General Jerry Brown put it, "[These staff members] maliciously violated the trust of their patients, by holding them down and forcibly administering psychotropic medications if they dared to question their care . . . This is appalling behavior, which amounts to assault with a deadly weapon."

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Since no one wants to ever experience such perverse "care," everyone must work together to prevent such appalling types of (alleged) abuse from being visited upon any of us.

Carefully Visit Each Nursing Home You Are Considering

One of the best ways to reduce nursing home abuse is to avoid choosing the wrong facility in the first place. If you carefully use your own eyes and ears while visiting each nursing home on your list, you should be able to spot some of the "red flags" that must be avoided. Here's a checklist of things to ask yourself while visiting a prospective nursing home:

- Do the residents look clean and are they wearing the proper attire for the time of day when you are visiting?
- Are the staff members sincerely smiling? Also, do they appear eager to personally answer your questions – or quickly refer you to those with more knowledge?
- Is there a positive odor throughout most of the facility? Never seriously consider a place that doesn't appear to be completely clean. Be sure to check out the dining areas, rehabilitation rooms and other facilities.
- Are the patients' requests for help being responded to quickly? It's becoming far too common to see patients sitting in the doorways of their rooms, calling out for help that just isn't coming anytime soon. Beware of any place where audio alarms or flashing lights (above rooms) are being ignored (or not even acknowledged).
- What does the surrounding neighborhood look like? If possible, visit a nearby place of worship, police station or other reliable facility to find out if the people there know anything about the nursing home's reputation. Of course, it's always best to get a personal friend's reference for a facility whenever possible. (Note: Be sure you can realistically reach the facility *quickly*, should your loved one's condition suddenly worsens. (You may also want to ask hospice groups serving the area for their opinions of the place– if they'll share them).
- Can the facility provide you with a reasonable guarantee that adequate transportation is available for critical doctor appointments elsewhere? If you can't take your friend or family member to the doctor because you're working full-time (or live somewhat far away), be sure the facility can guarantee you that *safe* transportation via a state-approved van or bus is available on most days.

- How good and well-balanced are the meals? Patients frequently complain about the food served at nursing homes. Try to take their complaints seriously whenever possible and eat a meal or two as a guest.
- Does the facility tend to run smoothly during the day, at night (and on weekends)? You should personally visit at different times to be sure there's adequate staffing at all times.
- Should you consider installing a video camera in your loved one's room to try and improve the quality of care? If the law allows this in your area, be sure the camera has adequate audio capabilities and cannot be turned off by staff without your *prior* permission.
- Does the facility usually have at least one senior administrator on hand during at least part of every Saturday and Sunday? When highly critical events occur with someone's health or natural disasters occur, you'll want this type of person on hand.
- Also ask yourself: Is their adequate lighting; a pleasant mix of regularly scheduled activities for the residents and are there adequate areas for visiting patients? This latter question can be very important since so many nursing home patients are forced to double-up in small units with roommates, leaving little room for private conversations.

Do Your Homework Ahead of Time and Read Up on Each Facility

Before ever visiting a particular nursing home, be sure to visit one or more of the following government Web sites that usually list rankings or reviews for every approved facility:

The California Department of Aging: <http://www.aging.ca.gov/> (Should you or a loved one need to obtain care in another state, just: (1) choose a search engine, (2) enter that other state's name, (3) add a "plus" sign and (4) add either the word "aging" or words "department of aging". That type of search should usually provide you with one or more relevant state government links. Be sure to look for a link ending in ".gov.")

The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services

http://search.hhs.gov/search?q=nursing+homes&entqr=0&ud=1&sort=date%3AD%3AL%3Ad1&output=xml_no_dtd&site=HHS&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&lr=lang_en&client=HHS&proxystylesheet=HHS

Medicare's Nursing Home Link:

<http://www.medicare.gov/NHCompare/Include/DataSection/Questions/SearchCriteriaNEW.asp?version=default&browser=IE%7C7%7CWinXP&language=English&defaultstatus=0&pagelist=Home&CookiesEnabledStatus=True>

Medicaid's Nursing Home Link:

<http://www.cms.hhs.gov/apps/media/press/release.asp?Counter=3383&intNumPerPage=10&checkDate=&checkKey=&srchType=1&numDays=3500&srchOpt=0&srchData=&keywordType=All&chkNewsType=1%2C+2%2C+3%2C+4%2C+5&intPage=&showAll=&pYear=&year=&desc=&cboOrder=date>

The Alzheimer's Organization

(Check to see if your local/closest office can suggest various local nursing homes for you to visit that have good reputations.)

<http://www.alz.org/index.asp?gclid=CLD71rLUw5kCFSQeDQodJDWQvA>

(For additional reading, you may want to visit the following government links:

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/Documents/ResidentsRightsPacket.pdf> and

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/Documents/AbuseWhatToDo.pdf>)

(Note: These government links may change frequently when updated. If you encounter a broken link, (1) enter the name of the government department in a search engine and then (2) when you reach the Home Page, enter “nursing home” in that page’s search box. You should be able to find what you need in that manner.)

The End