



January 4, 2005

Guide Measures Nursing Homes In 15 Categories

By DONNA KOEHN

Nursing home residents should be kept in restraints only when ordered by a physician as part of a treatment plan designed to ensure their safety.

It's never the preferred choice in patient care, as people kept in restraints can become weak, lose their ability to go to the bathroom on their own and develop bedsores.

Of course, the omnipresent fear of families with a loved one in a nursing home is that overworked staff will restrain patients inappropriately to make their jobs easier.

So a recent federal report stating that 35,000 fewer nursing home residents are being kept in restraints than was the case two years ago is good news. The number is down 23 percent.

The report from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, released Dec. 22, also said that fewer nursing home residents are in pain, the Associated Press reports.

Measurements of pain among long-term nursing home patients dropped 38 percent since 2002. Among those in short-term care, the drop was 11 percent during that time.

The report showed an increase of 2 percent in the number of patients with bedsores.

Government Doesn't Audit

The data, compiled through Medicare's "Nursing Home Quality Initiative," are open to some criticism. The **Center for Medicare Advocacy**, a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group, points out that the information is reported by the nursing homes themselves.

Although the nation's approximately 16,400 nursing homes are required to disclose the data on care, it's easy to imagine that some might be tempted to cook the books. The federal government does not audit the numbers for validity or accuracy.

That said, patients and their families appreciate anything that encourages the right kind of care.

According to the report, about 1.6 million people live in nursing homes nationwide on any given day. Over the course of a year, more than 3 million people will stay in a nursing home.

In November 2002, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services began publishing a guide to nursing homes throughout the country.

Available at www.medicare.gov or 1-800-633-4227, the guide gives consumers a chance to assess a nursing home's performance on 15 measures such as number of bedsores and patients' weight loss.

However, a common complaint is that the guide is confusing and cumbersome to use. Data are not always up to date.

Nursing home advocates have concluded that the guide is useful but should only be used as part of an assessment of the job a nursing home is doing.

See For Yourself

Here are some tips from AARP and other elder advocates for selecting a nursing home and assessing the quality of its care:

* Nothing beats the eyes - and the nose. Visit a facility on different days and times, including mealtimes. Take note of general cleanliness and nursing staff levels.

* Ask members of the nursing staff how long they and others have worked there. High turnover is a bad sign.

* Ask the nursing home administrator about staff-to-resident ratios.

* Ask if the facility has a plan of care for each resident and if it is revised continually.

* Ask for advice from people you know and trust, such as a doctor or social worker who might have knowledge of local facilities.

* Check with the long-term care ombudsman council, which is charged with conducting unannounced visits to assess nursing home care. The toll-free number in Florida is 1-888-831-0404.

Copyright 2005 The Tribune Co.