

Potential for abuse grows as the U.S. ages

BY DUSTI HARVEY

According to the U.S. Administration on Aging, a division of the Department of Health & Human Services, as of 2003 approximately 12.3 percent of our population was 65 years of age or older. About one in every eight Americans is now over the age of 65, and the Census Bureau estimates that in another 20 years their numbers will grow to represent over 20 percent of our population. By the year 2020, the number of people alive over the age of 85 will nearly double.

While a great many of our elderly live healthy lives, the sad fact is that many of our elderly cannot care for themselves because of illness, surgery or physical frailty. Some may require assisted living facilities for a short time, to recover from surgery, illness or injury. Others may have to permanently move into a nursing home where medical assistance is continually available. The difficult and

emotional decision process involved in moving parents or other loved ones into such a facility can be exacerbated by fears that they may be in danger from abuse or neglect.

The aging of a significant portion of our population has led to substantial growth in the residential nursing care industry. Large corporations built for-profit "assisted living" facilities at a rapid pace during the 1990s, now considered a boom time for their industry. While these for-profit centers are highly visible, the majority of care facilities for older persons, sometimes referred to as "nursing homes," are smaller, independent operations run by



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Guest writer discusses what others can do

From the Executive's Desk

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GUEST COMMENTARY

families or small businesses, or facilities operated by nonprofit organizations. (Sometimes) these nonprofit and smaller facilities do not hire well-trained individuals with the proper experience in caring for the elderly. Many organizations do not train their staff adequately to deal with the types of situations that can arise in nursing homes. Most often the nursing home is

understaffed.

These conditions, and many others, can lead to accidents and injuries inflicted on nursing home residents. There have also been cases where nursing homes may have consciously allowed negligent behavior or abusive behavior to occur. Unfortunately most of these abuses to a patient's dignity go unreported AND unpunished. Nursing home law states that a nursing home must care for the resident in such a manner and in such an environment as will promote maintenance or enhancement of the quality of life of each resident.

If you suspect any kind of abuse or neglect of an elderly person, you should immediately:

- Voice your concern to nursing home personnel and document the specifics of the problem.
- Bring your concern to staff supervisors if the problem persists.
- Follow the facility

grievance process, documenting your concerns and seeking a timely response.

- Contact the Long-Term Care Ombudsman at (800) 432-2080 who will intervene to address a problem with nursing home care.

- Contact Adult Protective Services at (800) 797-3260 who will investigate an allegation of abuse or neglect.

- Talk with nursing home inspectors or call them at NM Health Facility Licensing and Certification at (800) 752-8649.

- Continue to insist on good care and document your issues and concerns

- Pursue a civil legal action against the nursing home. Most law firms will provide an initial consultation free of charge

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