

Abuses in Nursing Homes



(TRIBUNE Staff Photo)

Elderly woman sits alone in South Side nursing home.

Some Elderly Prefer Death, Reporters Find

The first assignment of the newly formed Tribune Task Force was a comprehensive investigation of patient care in Chicago area nursing homes. This is the first report on the six-week probe by Reporters William Jones, Philip Caputo, William Currie and Pamela Zekman.

They are hidden in warehouses for the dying.

Millions of tax dollars are misspent every year to keep them in squalor so depressing that they enjoy talking about their own deaths.

They are Chicago's elderly poor and they are being abandoned by the thousands into Chicago nursing homes so poorly administered that a bum off the street can become a nurse's aide in less than 24 hours and administer narcotics and other medications to the ill.

The Abandoned

They have been abandoned. And with every day that passes thousands of our senior citizens are spending their last days wondering why it all must end in the indignity of filthy, rat-infested rooms, physical abuse, wretched food and a series of caretakers who can't see beyond the next welfare or Social Security check.

There is only one way to tell their story and that is to live with them, bathe them, feed them, watch and listen to their "keepers" and then report their story of rage, confusion and frustration as they live out their days in a warehouse for the dying. We worked and lived in these warehouses and this is what is happening:

1. Two old women, their bodies crippled with age and trembling in the cold of a winter night without heat, screech and claw at each other as they struggle for a single, ragged blanket. A nurse's aide appears in the doorway, watches the struggle for a moment and then shouts: "Shut your goddam mouths, both of you, or I'll take your blankets away and you can both freeze."

Kicks and Abuse

2. An elderly man, his right foot and leg wasted from a skin disease, accidentally brushes the foot against the white uniform of a woman aide. In an instant the woman kicks him in the leg and punches him in the chest, repeatedly cursing the man and describing him as an "old bastard."

3. The 37 patients living on the filthy second floor of a large North Side nursing home wait silently to be served their evening meal. On this night, however, there is not enough food and the nurse's aide in charge scrapes uneaten portions of steamed cabbage and noodles onto other trays and serves it a second and third time until all are fed.

4. A nurse complains that many elderly patients are kept in the home even tho they are seriously ill and belong in a hospital. They are kept there because

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their presence guarantees a continued flow of welfare payments. "They're on their death beds before they send them to the hospital," she notes.

"They leave them lying here when they have fevers up to 103 or 104, aren't eating and have diarrhea."

No Room for Dignity

5. Two aides herd a man and a woman into the same bathroom in an effort to complete the bathing of patients as quickly as possible. Both patients are confused and obviously embarrassed, but they obey the order to undress in front of each other. Then, in a final desperate effort to salvage a shred of dignity, the woman insists: "He's not my boyfriend." Once bathed, they again stand staring at each other while the aides dry them with dirty pillow cases. There are no towels.

6. A 91-year-old man stands tottering in a bathtub of a South Side nursing home as two aides attempt to give him a bath. He pleads with them to "slow down, I can't bend my legs this fast." One of the aides responds with a sharp slap across the face and the man cries out.

This is not an effort to condemn the entire nursing home industry. Indeed, in some of the homes where we worked the atmosphere and patient care matched that of a hospital.

But to the outside observers—especially the families of the elderly, mentally ill and other helpless persons—the search for a good home can be tragically deceptive.

Just as they have learned to outwit and avoid any major crackdown from city and county health officials, so have these warehouse operators learned to dupe the public.

"Take Special Care"

Many homes have freshly waxed and sparkling front hallways while the living quarters of the patients are little better than dimly lit, filthy dungeons. As one operator told his maintenance man:

"Take special care of these front two rooms—my office and this hall. You know what I mean, anything that people

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How 'Warehouses for the Dying' Abuse Elderly



Man is one of thousands of elderly poor in local nursing homes.

(TRIBUNE Staff Photo)

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will see when they first come in. We must keep it very clean."

Another operator insisted that his janitor ignore the fifth in rooms occupied by patients and concentrate on the lobby area because "the lobby and (front) hall are the first thing the Health Department will see if they show up."

These are the places where many of our elderly have been sentenced to die and they know it.

"We are the living dead," one old man observed. "Look around at these people. We're all worn out and we just keep on living. We'd be better off dead."

They Are Obstacles

They sit in rooms where the paint is peeling from the walls and the windows covered with grime and they stare. If they are helpless, senile or bedridden they also may have to endure the taunts and abuse of aides who consider them as obstacles to their coffee breaks and to the end of another eight-hour shift.

Our very presence on the staffs of nearly 20 nursing homes in the past six weeks underscored the lack of controls and the gross neglect in an industry responsible for the health and safety of thousands of helpless citizens.

Posing as drifters, college students and nurse's aides with out-of-state experience, we were able to find employment virtually all in many of the hundreds of nursing homes in Chicago and its suburbs. The investigation was conducted in cooperation with the Better Government Association, which also sent its investigators into the homes.

Becomes Administrator

Our phony references were never checked and in one case a reporter was hired as a nursing home administrator less than 72 hours after he applied for work as a handyman.

The owner admitted he was under pressure from the Chicago Board of Health to hire an administrator and apparently was willing to fill the post with the first candidate who walked in the door and was willing to work for \$80 a week.

In another home, an applicant seeking work as a janitor became a nurse over the objections of the director of nursing. The administrator ignored the protest, claiming the applicant was a "personable young man" who could easily master the techniques of administering drugs to the elderly.

Hire from Skid Row

In a more-bizarre case of employee recruiting, a northwest suburban nursing home pays a finder's-fee for skid row alcoholics to work as orderlies, nurse's aides and cooks between binges. The clearing house for this cheap labor is a West Madison Street flophouse from where derelicts are sent to the suburb by train. Once they arrive at the nursing home, they must stay for 30 days and are not paid until they depart.

Perhaps the most frightening practice uncovered during the investigation was the handling of narcotics and medication and the possible tragic consequences for patients.

One reporter wandered into a north suburban nursing home and claimed

she had experience as a nurse's aide. No effort was made to check her credentials before she was hired.

In less than 24 hours she was left in charge of the home and its 32 patients. She also was told to administer a variety of medications to the patients. She narrowly avoided giving what could have been a fatal dosage to an elderly man. Tragedy was averted only by chance when another aide returned to pick up a forgotten purse.

"Oh, by the Way"

"Oh, by the way," the aide told the reporter as she hurried out the door. "If his pulse is over 60 don't give him his pill. He might have a heart attack. Sometimes you screw up giving these pills, but it happens."

In another home the aides have discovered a simple way to deal with patients who balk at taking their medication. They throw it in the sink.

The patients in a large North Side home are frequently subjected to a bizarre form of Russian roulette with medication because of the rapid turnover in employees. At one time, they were at the mercy of a janitor, hired as a nurse, and an aide who had just replaced a fired employee.

"Just Borrow Some . . ."

"I'm really not too sure who gets what medication, but I'll do my best," the aide told the janitor as they prepared to distribute the medication. "Oh, this lady is out of her medicine, but I'll just borrow some from this lady."

The investigation also disclosed that several volumes of new state codes

regulating the operation of all nursing and shelter care homes largely have been ignored since they went into effect last June. Public and private employees familiar with the new codes ridicule the publications because they have never been enforced.

Nurses employed by the County Health Department have refused since 1967 to inspect the nearly 100 nursing homes in suburban Cook County.

Licenses Still Issued

Sources close to the agency said the refusal came after years of watching substandard homes repeatedly obtain new licenses from the State Department of Health despite critical reports submitted by county nurses.

This bitterness extends to employees of many of the worst nursing homes where they are repeatedly frustrated in efforts to provide proper care. They describe the food as slim and one floor supervisor declared, "I wouldn't put my dog in this place."

For most residents of the warehouses for the dying, the misery will continue until they die. A group of them listened attentively one bleak February day to a minister who visited a filthy North Side nursing home. His message was one they were waiting to hear:

"Are you ready to change your cross for a crown? For when you die and go to heaven you will have a crown. In heaven there are no nursing homes . . . no suffering, no pain . . ."

Tomorrow: Where are the warehouses and who gets the profits?