

Nursing Home Care a Comfort to Resident, Kin

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Often when we read or hear comments about Ontario health care we learn there are shortages of hospital beds, shortages of nurses and support staff, and the need for more doctors, especially in rural areas. There also are reports of long waiting times for important operations and for admission to nursing homes. The disastrous case of Elizabeth Wettlaufer in which eight residents were murdered in nursing homes has brought negative feelings concerning health care for seniors.

On balance, however, most Ontario citizens are happy Ontario's publicly run health care is available. There are many countries where Ontario citizens are envied for our health care coverage provided under OHIP.

My personal good news is that after waiting more than two years, my wife has been accepted at a well-run nursing home in St. Thomas. We have been happily married for more than 65 years and, unfortunately, in the past few years, she has developed Alzheimer's disease.

She responds well to care, yet the continued effects of gradual and inevitable cognitive decline are part of the nature of Alzheimer's disease.

The really good news is the staff at the St. Thomas Valleyview Nursing Home are unbelievably patient with those for whom they care. Some Alzheimer's patients are fortunate to have visitors several times a week. Many patients don't get visitors for months or even years at a time.

As Alzheimer's progresses, patients become lonesome, depressed, and irritable with their fellow patients. They misplace articles. They mistakenly walk into rooms they think are their own.

If their hearing is poor, they may think other patients are insulting them or accusing them of something that becomes the basis for an argument. Under these conditions, patients occasionally will insult or strike out at each other or staff. Other patients may resort to tearful responses concerning the problems they perceive.

Some patients need considerable help with eating. Often articles of food or beverage are dropped on the floor. Occasionally, patients may express their apologies, but frequently, they respond without any understanding of the cause of the mishap or with an accusation that someone else was to blame, even to the point of blaming the staff member who comes to clean up the mess.

The remarkable response to these events is the calm and patient manner of staff. They do not respond with anger, insults, or accusations even if they have been the subject of insults or have been yelled at. The staff behave politely, with caring and an attitude of making things better. The staff are the “adults” in the situation. They are there to help and to offer assurances to the Alzheimer’s patients.

I am convinced the staff are very special people with endless patience and with caring, understanding, compassion and wisdom. They are special people with special skills. Surely they must love their jobs or they could not continue each day willing to give comfort and kindness where it is most needed.

The remarkable thing about the approach of the staff is it actually works. The patients know the staff are to be respected and trusted. The staff, in the end, are the arbiters of where and how to stop an argument or to choose activities with the patients’ safety in mind.

The staff pick activities within the range of each patient’s ability so the patients will do the activities chosen for them and will end up with a measure of success, rather than an activity which will heighten their feelings of defeat.

I have chosen to write about Valleyview Nursing Home because it is the one with which I am most familiar. I hope the same excellent qualities of good staffing can be found in other Ontario nursing homes as well.

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