SAFETY FOR SENIORS IN NURSING HOMES

By: David M. Gottesman, Esq., August 4, 2000

The older we get, it seems that the elderly become more and more a focus in our lives. Leaving a parent off at a nursing home conjures up some of the same thoughts which they must have had when they dropped their children off at the bus stop for camp in the summer, sent them off to school, or even went out for the night and left the kids with a new baby sitter. They never knew what would happen in their absence, but weighed the risks, and did what they thought would be best for the family. They were comfortable enough with the situation to deposit their little loved ones in the care of others, hoping that all would be well when they returned. Children would come home with the wounds of battle, whether they were scrapes from sliding into first base, or bumps from having fallen when climbing a tree. Most injuries were small and became battle scars and reminders of their "accomplishments" for many years to come. Unfortunately, too often, our parents are suffering from their own sort of battle scars when they are not properly supervised when in the care of nursing homes. It is a growing phenomenon which occurs when undertrained, undereducated, and underpaid staff are given the important responsibility of tending to the extraordinary needs of the elderly and don't treat them with the appropriate amount of care.

When visiting a nursing home facility, questions should be asked when parents are discovered to have been cut, bruised, or suffering from swelling. On many occasions these injuries are as a result of falling when trying to get to the bathroom, or even trying to get out of bed. These observations are especially important when dealing with patients who are without the capacity to speak for themselves because of physical or mental challenges. Too often patients are left alone for hours at a time. They are sometimes found not properly fed, nor turned in bed, nor properly medicated. Malnutrition should not be the way that a healthy adult meets his or her maker. Further, bed sores result when patients are not properly cared for when they are either bed or wheelchair bound. These incredibly deep open wounds which occur sometimes take only a few days of poor care to develop, but sometimes take months to heal. Some of these body ulcers even result in surgery when proper nursing care is not used or effective.

Visitors are sometimes amazed at the dramatic change which they notice on the first few visits of a patient in a nursing home. Patients have a right not to be physically nor medically restrained. That means that drugs should not be used just to keep the patient from being a bother. Questions should be asked of the staff as to what the status of the patient's condition is, and doctors should be required to give meaningful answers to questions as to why certain conditions exist. The fact that the doctor is a very busy person is no excuse for not returning calls to answer such questions, and the fact that there may be only one staff meeting a week is no reason not to address important issues when they are apparent.

We do not want to worry every moment of every day that our senior citizens, the people who brought us into the world, are being abused or ignored in our absence. Unfortunately, the only way to be sure that no such mistreatment occurs is to have a presence at the facility on a regular basis. Report any problems you see, and if you are not getting the help you need from the facility, be sure to consult with social service providers or legal counsel who might be able to help. As we age and face the reality of the future of possibly spending our last days in a nursing home, we are only going to be helping ourselves by making sure that such facilities properly care for our seniors today. By doing so, we establish the norm of what quality treatment is and create a standard which should carry on into the future.