

5-Star Treatment

By Reg P. Wydeven
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I'll never forget the time in high school when one of my buddies and I went with our friend to visit his grandma in the nursing home. On the day we went, they were cleaning all of the residents' rooms, so all of them were hanging out in the lobby.

When we asked our friend which resident was his grandma, he replied, "The one in the wheel chair." That wasn't very helpful, as he only narrowed it down to about 37 people.

When my grandma had to go into a nursing home, it was a very difficult thing for our family. Like most people, we toured a few places, talked to lots of friends who had family members in nursing homes and just tried to pick the one we felt the best about. Unfortunately, there was no 'Consumer Reports' for nursing homes.

Well, thanks to the federal government, now there is.

For the first time ever, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has rated the nation's nursing homes. The CMS uses a 5-star rating system. Of the 16,000 nursing homes in the U.S., that house 1.5 million patients, only 12 percent received the highest rating, while 22 percent earned the lowest.

Under the new system, five stars means a nursing home ranks "much above average," four star indicates "above average," three means "about average," two is "below average" with a one indicating "much below average." The rankings will be updated quarterly.

The ratings are based on three major criteria: state inspections, staffing levels and quality measures, such as the percentage of residents with pressure sores. The nursing homes will receive stars for each of those categories as well as for their overall quality.

The CMS used three year's worth of inspections to rate nursing homes based on an annual survey designed to measure how well homes protect the health and safety of their residents. The measurement for staffing reports the number of hours of nursing and other staff dedicated per patient each day. The measurement for quality looks at 10 areas, including the percent of patients with bed sores after their first 90 days in the nursing home and the number of residents whose mobility worsened after admission.

While the CMS obviously designed the rating system to help families evaluate nursing homes, officials caution that nothing can substitute for visiting a nursing home when making a decision.

While the government thinks the rating system is a great idea, many in the nursing home industry don't agree. For example, the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging believes the system was implemented prematurely and was not planned in conjunction with nursing home operators. In addition, the rating system does not factor in resident satisfaction in its scoring.

Some consumer groups, such as the National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform, are also not yet on board. There are concerns over data collection, such as the staffing information that is self-reported just before state surveys and is widely recognized as unreliable.

So basically, the rating system is a helpful tool for evaluating nursing homes. However, everyone pretty much agrees you should still tour potential sites and talk to family and friends to hear their experiences, too, so you can narrow down your choices better than my buddy narrows down grandmas.

Have a happy 2009.

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