

Chapter 4

JUDGING THE QUALITY OF A NURSING HOME

Even the best nursing homes can experience problems now and then, yet still provide good care. Keep this in mind when you visit or enter a nursing home.

Inspections by the State

All nursing homes in Michigan must have a state license to operate and must meet strict standards for patient care, safety, personnel, and physical environment. In addition, if a nursing home meets other requirements, then it can receive funds from Medicaid and Medicare to cover the expenses of patients who live there.

Of course, some facilities provide much more than the bare minimum, which is a plus for people who seek high-quality care. But if a home doesn't meet even basic standards, the State of Michigan will step in and require the home to correct its problems.

The Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) is responsible for monitoring approximately 420 nursing homes. The MDCH inspects these facilities regularly. If the MDCH finds any health or safety violations, it will require the home to correct the problems. Also, the MDCH can revoke the home's license to operate.

Investigative teams survey each nursing home in Michigan at least once every 12-18 months. These teams include registered nurses, dietitians, fire safety inspectors, and sanitation experts. Physicians are also available for consultation. To make sure the institution meets all requirements, state inspectors look at everything from infection control, patient care, housekeeping, fire protection, physical safety and maintenance to staffing patterns and staff training. The MDCH also inspects a nursing home when it receives a complaint.

The inspections are unannounced. In this way, the MDCH gets to see how a facility operates on an average day

The most important thing to look for in a deficiency list is repeated complaints about the same type of violation.

Deficiency Lists

If you want to find out about health and safety violations at a particular nursing home, you can read the inspection reports. They are available at the facility, from MDCH, or online at www.medicare.gov/NHCompare.

The Inspection Reports provide a detailed history of a nursing home's problems and the facility's efforts to correct them. It takes patience and determination to fully understand these materials.

Some deficiencies are more serious than others. A facility with a lot of minor deficiencies may actually provide better care than one with fewer but more serious violations. So don't be fooled by numbers. It's the severity of the problem that counts. When touring a nursing home, see if you notice any of the same problems on the deficiency lists.

The Ombudsman Program

Michigan is also served by a Long Term Care Ombudsman employed by the State of Michigan. An ombudsman is an advocate to help people resolve nursing home problems. Local ombudsmen, often working with trained volunteers, visit nursing homes and respond to complaints from residents and their families. The ombudsman program is not an enforcement agency but uses negotiation and mediation to try to resolve disputes.

The ombudsman is especially interested in problems affecting the health, safety, welfare, and legal rights of nursing home residents. As a result, he or she has a good working knowledge of the living conditions at most facilities. Be sure to check with the nursing home ombudsman if you want up-to-date information about local nursing homes.