

LOOKING OUT FOR OUR AGING POPULATION

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I just got back from the nursing home. I went to see my mom, the second time this morning. It's not easy. Every day it's something different and NEVER a sign that things are improving. My first visit today brought anger and a familiar feeling of total helplessness.

My first experience with long-term care started about 16 years ago with my father. I had moved to Tennessee with my family and like all good daughters of the "baby-boomer" generation, made it a point to talk to my parents by phone at least weekly. You can hide a lot of emotion on the other end of a phone line but there are some things we "just know". I *knew* all was not well with my parents but no one would communicate with me. (Even my brother who lived in Jacksonville, I believe was in denial.) As my sense of doom and anxiety built, my husband, two year old son and I made a hasty trip to Jacksonville to see for ourselves what my mother was not telling me.

When mom came out to the car, I was **shocked!!** She had lost so much weight and her face reflected great strain. Nor was she her usual cheerful self, thrilled to see her children and grandson. I couldn't *imagine* what was going on. I went inside to see my father, and saw for myself what had changed my parents life forever: daddy was lying on the living-room sofa where he had been for several weeks, unable to do anything for himself. My mother, in her typical, caring, and loving personality, had been taking care of my father's every need by herself. It had just about killed her! I knew that this could not continue, I'd lose both my mother and father if proper care was not found for daddy.

With the help of my father-in-law, we did find a facility that would take daddy based on his ability (or inability) to pay. We had to do something, but it wasn't a task we were ready for. Shouldn't we take care of daddy? Isn't that what families do? However, I lived 800 miles away with my busy family; my brother had his own career and family; it was *impossible* for either of us to take the responsibility of caring for my aging father.

After daddy died, my mother lived by herself in a Bradenton, FL senior citizen center. She was very active, loved and happy. In 1991, she fell, breaking her hip. After hip surgery and 3 months' rehabilitation in a nursing center, she returned home. She fell twice more at home, became fearful of living alone, and put herself in a nursing home. She didn't need to be in a nursing home! She was **not** an old lady - but who else could supervise her well-being and safety 24 hours a day? I guess a part of me was glad that the decision was hers and not one my brother and I were forced to make, with mother begging us not to remove her from her home. Many children are put in that situation; I'm sure it's a terrible feeling..

Although my brother lived in a nearby community, he was still in denial and had a very difficult time visiting mom, much less getting involved in her care. In 1993, I decided I wanted her closer to me so that I could more easily care for her and give her the attention I felt she deserved. Then began the overwhelming task of moving mother to Jacksonville. After about four months, we were fortunate that a bed became available in a facility that was convenient to where I now lived. Thank goodness her current state of health allowed her to make the trip without too much discomfort!

This is all beginning to sound redundant, but it's true. In 1991, my 82 year old mother-in-law living in South Carolina developed Shingles and from that point on her health began to deteriorate. It soon became evident to my husband, an only child, that we would have to move her closer to us. Although she only needed supervision, we were reluctant to move her in with us because of the emotional strain it would put on our family and we didn't have the extra room. We also didn't know when she would require special care - like dressing, bathing, feeding, transferring from bed to chair - where we ourselves would need to be trained and qualified. We moved her to Jacksonville, found a nice apartment, and were fortunate to have a trustworthy person to come into her apartment once a week to do laundry, take her to the grocery, fix meals - whatever she needed. In the spring of 1994, it became apparent that she was becoming very unsteady on her feet and forgetful; it was only a matter of time before she fell and broke her hip.

After much planning we moved her into the same nursing home with my mother. At least it was easier for my husband and me to look after them; and thankfully, they were good friends and got along well. My mother and mother-in-law were soon moved into the same room and we felt this would be excellent for both of them, to spend their days talking and reminiscing. Well, as life would have it, my mother-in-law soon developed senile dementia and could not carry on a conversation. This left my mother with a friend and roommate who could not talk and a constant reminder of what life might have in store for her.

I've been dealing with long-term care for my mother for about 4 years now. It's difficult, at best. Even though her care has been provided by nursing facilities, my responsibility and love as her daughter hasn't stopped. If I don't look out for my mother's well-being during her senior years, who will? What about those aged people whose children or other family members have turned them away because of their own inability to deal with the very natural process of aging?

Today's society is no longer afraid of dying too young, but fearful of living too long. And we can thank modern medicine and improved life-styles for this. But who **is** looking out for our aging population, making sure they receive the type of care and attention they're entitled to? It bothers me a lot; if someone like me, who has so much interaction with her aging mother and her care-givers, is so distressed about the quality of that care, what in the world is happening to those elderly people who don't *have* a family member to look after them?

Now's the time for all of us "baby-boomers" to be thinking of our last years here on this earth. Who will be responsible for our care and determine where or when that care will be received? While we are yet of clear mind and good health, we have a choice and voice in the decisions about our own well-being. Be pro-active, denial is not allowed here - long-term care is **real** and

exists today (if you don't think so, just visit a local nursing home to volunteer your time) - learn the facts about long-term care, then decide the best route for you. And most importantly, be sure you communicate your decisions and desires with a family member; your need for long-term care may be sudden.

My mother-in-law passed away in August of 1995. My mother is still with us physically as well as in spirit and mind. Her body is passed repair; her mind, however, has always been sharp. I'm not sure a keen mind in your later years is a blessing, or a curse. I do know one thing for certain, it's much easier being a parent to my children than being a parent to my mother.

*Editor's note: This column was written in February. Lynette L. Brown's mother died April 4.

My mother had been moved to sub-acute to receive an intravenous mode of antibiotic. I hadn't seen her since Sunday and today there was a huge blood-red spot about 2 X 4 inches on her right forearm. How could that happen? What or who caused it? The questions were rampant in my mind.

I came home to clear my mind and try to intelligently assess the situation. On the suggestion of my husband, I called her doctor (my mom's on Medicaid) to see what he knew about the injury I had seen on her arm. There was beginning to be a silver cloud to this morning's black cloud - the doctor was making his rounds at the nursing home when I called and standing right at the nurses' station! I was able to talk to him directly (that in itself is an accomplishment!); he did not know of the mark on her arm but at my urging would take a look at it.