

Caring for care home residents at the end of life



It has been estimated that one in four people over the age of 85 will move into a care home at some point before they die and it is there that one in five of all deaths take place. Thus for many older people, the likelihood of dying in residential care is a strong possibility. Significantly, many care home residents have neither kith nor kin to support them so responsibility for ensuring that the wishes and expectations of their residents in relation to end-of-life care lies heavily with care homes themselves.

The Relatives & Residents Association (R&RA) - which was established 15 years ago to help individuals and their loved ones find their way through the maze of issues involved in deciding to move into care - actively encourages care homes to ensure that all their residents receive optimal end-of-life care whatever their circumstances. Through our 5 day-a-week telephone advice line, R&RA provides crucial support to several thousand such people and their families every year. We offer advice, support and information dealing with inquiries on almost every topic, including end of life care.

We believe that it is crucial that homes themselves fully recognise their responsibilities and make every effort to train staff and managers in end-of -life care accordingly. We see this as covering much

more than policies and procedures although these are important. Essentially it must be about ensuring that the individuality and personhood of every resident is actively recognised and placed at the centre of care. Care of people when they are dying must be an extension of care when they are living. It has to start when a person first comes into care, with thorough care planning, and talking sensitively with residents about their needs, fears and expectations (and re-visiting this from time to time). It means responding to them with reassurance and compassion, involving relatives - if the residents wants them to be involved - and providing special support where there are no relatives.

We also believe that care homes need to think carefully about the place of death within the general life of the home – what is the philosophy underpinning their handling of death especially in relation to the wellbeing of other residents? Death is a common and not unusual occurrence in residential care. It should not be hidden away, but neither should it dominate the overall atmosphere of a home negatively. How this is handled will depend on the skill and empathy of staff and managers.

As well as assisting individual residents and relatives, R&RA is there to help care homes think through some of these issues by

building on the direct experience of families and their loved ones.

We think that older people – usually very old people – who need caring for in the final stages of their lives deserve the best society can provide. They have served their country well and have contributed to the common good over many years. The time comes when they should have that contribution recognised. Caring well for people at the end of life is the **l**east we can do.

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