



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

Recent headlines a cause for concern

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News November 21, 2011

THREE North Shore care facilities made the headlines this month, for all the wrong reasons.

In West Vancouver a senior in care was found dead in a stairwell. Last January a North Vancouver senior in care was accidentally asphyxiated by a caregiver with limited training. We are only reading about it now because allegedly the facility tried to cover up the incident. A third senior, residing in a care facility in West Vancouver alleges that he was physically abused by his caregiver during the morning routine.

What in the world is going on here? Is there a breakdown in seniors care in our community? I wish I knew the answer to that question but I don't.

The Ministry of Health keeps statistics on the number of, "patient safety event causing death incidents," for seniors in care in B.C., but those figures are not readily available.

I can tell you that issues of neglect and isolation in the seniors population in and out of care are real and growing. We know that about one in 10 seniors is abused but front line personnel who work with seniors think the number is much higher than that.

As the seniors columnist for this paper I hear both sides of the story. I hear regularly from seniors living in care who are happy, healthy and engaged in their community. And, I hear from families who have removed a parent from care because they felt their concerns and complaints were ignored or dismissed, or because they felt unwelcome at the facility or they thought that provincial oversight was inadequate.

The three cases I've cited don't seem to have much in common. All three facilities in question are privately operated but I think it is a big mistake to read too much into that. We are going to need to build a broad range of housing options for seniors in the next few years. My experience tells me that most North Shore seniors would prefer to be in a facility that is privately operated.

The problem, in my opinion, isn't with ownership, it's with regulation. It's not just a question of having more rigorous inspections, or more inspections more often at care centres. Most people assume the same care standards apply for all care facilities. That's not the case.

Currently, B.C. provides seniors services and care through two different sets of laws and standards (the Community Care and Assisted Living Act and the Hospital Act). Most privately owned facilities are governed under the Hospital Act, a less stringent regime than the Community Care and Assisted Living Act.

There is an obvious benefit to having all seniors in care covered under the more stringent act. And, there is a benefit for the public as well; namely better access to information.

Right now incident reports for facilities governed under the Hospital Act (the weaker act) do not have to be released under freedom of information law. With prompting from the B.C. Ombudsman's office and following some recent unflattering reports on the state of seniors care in the media, the B.C. Ministry of Health has indicated that, going forward, every senior in care will be regulated under the Community Care and Assisted Living Act.

There's a commitment there but no timetable for implementation. Let's hope it happens soon. I like to think of this as an early Christmas present from government.

Now, if we could just get the government to appoint a seniors representative, it might be enough to get me to believe in Santa Claus.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or send an email to lions_view@telus.net.