

12 Things to Consider When Choosing a Long-Term Care Facility

By: Rick Mehrer, Executive Director, St. Anne's Mead Senior Care Community

The other day, a friend asked me what he should look for in choosing a long-term care facility in Northern Michigan for his elderly parent with memory impairment. After thinking a lot about what makes St. Anne's Mead the wonderful home it is for seniors, I came up with this list of twelve items to consider when searching for the right facility. I hope those of you who are confronted with the same concern will find them helpful.

1. Try to schedule two tours of the facility you are considering, one during the meal time so that you can observe the food and how well the residents seem to be enjoying it and the other during peak activity times. Don't be afraid to speak to a few residents about how well they like the food. Residents will usually tell you the truth. Remember that residents with dementia frequently don't eat terribly well as it is, so it is all the more important that the food is good and that you see enough aides in the dining room to encourage residents to eat.
2. Tour during peak activity time, usually around 10 AM or 2 PM, in order to see how well the activities are carried out and attended. A facility can put anything they want on the activity calendar but are they really following through. I will speak more about activities for dementia residents later.
3. If you see family members visiting, don't be shy about asking them for their opinion about the facility. It might create an uncomfortable moment or two for the person touring you through the facility, but whose opinion is more important, the person who is being paid to say nice things about the facility, or someone who has actually experienced the care first hand. If the Admission Director is confident about the care at the facility, she will introduce you to family members you encounter during the tour.
4. Observe the interaction between the residents and the staff. Do the staff members acknowledge the residents when they pass them in the hallway? Do the residents smile at and speak to the staff as they walk by? Are the staff members friendly and open with you as you are walking through the facility with the admissions director? After all, you would expect the Admission's Director to be friendly but you want to find a place where the first line staff is friendly since they are the ones that will be interacting with your parents the most.
5. If there are odors throughout the facility you should take that as a sign of poor staffing, poor supervision, poor training, and poor systems in place to handle the cleanup of resident accidents and the processing of soiled clothing. All of that points to a poorly managed facility.

6. Make sure the facility has a good understanding of what dementia residents need in an activity program. St. Anne's Mead's Life Enrichment program is so good because it allows the residents to use that part of their brain that is still functioning fairly well, their hand memory. Residents with memory impairment don't do well in large group activities.
7. An assisted living facility is usually the right place for most residents with memory impairment. However, you should only place a person with dementia in a locked dementia unit if they truly are an elopement risk, not just because they tend to wander. Many dementia residents tend to develop wandering patterns in an attempt to find something or someone familiar to them but they do not need a locked unit unless they are combative when the staff attempts to re-direct them from exit doors.
8. It is important to not place dementia residents in a nursing home before they really need one. These residents, especially if they are wanderers, can cause real havoc in nursing homes due to constant wandering into other resident's rooms, lying on their beds, and picking up their things. The nursing home staff must constantly redirect dementia residents and that leads to behavior problems as the resident gets frustrated with being constantly told they are in the wrong place. In an assisted living community, residents' room doors usually lock, so a resident with dementia is not able to simply wander into another resident's room and most of the common areas such as sitting rooms, dining rooms, activity rooms etc. are safe areas for the resident to enter.
9. Many of the wandering behaviors can be curbed with an activity program that is designed to engage residents with dementia in activities where they are using their hands and staying busy. A resident with dementia cannot sit and discuss current events in a group activity but they can fold towels, arrange flowers, sort office supplies, sort nuts and bolts, paint a bird house, color an adult art picture, hold a baby doll and listen to music (they find it calming), do exercises, look at stacks of greeting cards, do basic math problems, do simple word search puzzles, roll ribbons, etc.
10. One of the best ways of deciding if the facility is well staffed with direct care staff and how well they are doing their jobs, even if the facility has good staffing ratios, is to simply observe residents as you walk past them. Are they neatly dressed, odor free, clean neat hair, brushed teeth (it will be obvious if they are not), well shaven, no food stains down the front of their blouses or shirts, proper fitting clothing that is in good condition (yes, buying clothing is not the staff's role but alerting the family when clothing needs to be purchased is).
11. Pay attention to how easy it is to navigate through the facility. A one story facility is usually the least confusing for a resident with memory impairment. They also

afford more space for safe walking, an important feature to promote wellness, and have the added bonus of being safer for an elderly population than a multi-story facility.

12. Finally, don't pick an Assisted Living facility just because they have a nursing home attached that accepts Medicaid for when your parent finally runs out of money. Find the best Assisted Living facility you can find. If funds are an issue, then look to move the resident to a good nursing home that accepts Medicaid when the resident's funds get down where they have the ability to pay privately in the nursing home for about six months. Many good nursing homes will not accept a straight Medicaid resident but will accept a private pay resident. Once the resident is in a facility that is Medicaid certified, they cannot ask the resident to leave just because they run out of money and have to apply for Medicaid.