

**TESTIMONY OF ELLEN CURZON
LAKESIDE, CALIFORNIA
July 27, 1998
TO SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING**

Senator Grassley, I wish to thank you and your committee for the opportunity to share my family's experience with convalescent homes and elder abuse.

My husband, Oswald Curzon, was a mail carrier for the U.S. Postal Service for thirty years. He developed a chronic impairment of the lower back as a result of carrying a mail bag for so long and by the time he was in his late seventies, this impairment had forced him to use a cane when moving around.

In July 1991 when my husband was 84, he suffered a stroke which did not paralyze him but caused weakness and some dementia. At that time I was 77 and in reasonably good health so was able to care for him at home for the next two and one-half years.

In December 1993 he suffered another, more severe stroke, which again did not result in paralysis but did cause further weakness and more severe dementia.

My husband was 6 feet tall and weighed 185 pounds. I am 5 feet 4 inches tall and weigh 120 pounds. He required constant care. He was legally blind so had to be helped with eating, bathing, moving about the house, using the bathroom and being put to bed. It became a 36-hour day.

Finally, in January 1994, my family and I made the decision to place my husband in a convalescent home. This was a traumatic decision for all of us but we knew that physically I was no longer able to cope with caring for him at home. It was conceivable that my husband could fall, with a greater probability that he would fall on me, and that I would be unable to summon help.

Making the decision was easy compared to finding a bed. We had a pension from the Postal Service and the minimum in Social Security which totaled less than \$2,000.00 per month. So I began visiting convalescent homes in the vicinity.

The average cost of convalescent/nursing home care in San Diego County is \$3,000. per month so I applied for Medical/Medicare funding. I also learned that convalescent/nursing homes have only a small number of beds set aside for patients under state/federal funding. The search for a suitable place for my husband was lengthy and exhausting. When I finally found a convalescent home, which on the surface looked decent and clean, I placed him there on January 25, 1994.

At that time my husband was in good health. He had insulin-controlled diabetes and was legally blind but he was able to eat and truly enjoyed his food. He had no decubitus ulcers or other infections of any kind.

I visited my husband every day but two in the two months he was in this facility. In six 1/2 weeks he lost 35 pounds, developed decubitus ulcers on the buttocks and became so dehydrated he flinched when touched. He was also bruised on the arms from bed restraints.

Due to his weight loss, his dentures no longer fit correctly and were causing sores in his mouth which made it extremely difficult for him to chew. His lower denture was then "lost" so he was being fed

pureed food which was so unappetizing he wouldn't eat it.

Every single day I had to literally hunt for someone to change him because when I would arrive about 10:00 a.m. he was always wet. One day he was in bed when I got there and had evidently been given an enema. The bed was full of the enema water and feces and it appeared as though he had been lying in this for hours.

Another day I asked that a urine sample be collected and sent to the lab because my husband had a history of urinary tract infections. The sample was secured and remained on the shelf behind the head nurse's desk for two days. Of course, by that time the sample was useless and was never sent. I found this out in the course of the investigation after my husband's death.

During the period of time my husband was in this facility, I called the doctor to whom he was assigned twice and went to his office on two different occasions to complain about the lack of care he was receiving and how he was obviously losing weight. (His regular physician did not practice in this area of the county so we had to accept the doctor assigned by the facility).

I never succeeded in either seeing or talking with the doctor until my husband became so alarmingly ill that I called frantically one morning and demanded that he be placed in a hospital. Twelve hours later he was finally admitted to the hospital. Due to severe dehydration his kidneys were failing and he had lost the ability to swallow so a feeding tube had to be inserted into his abdomen.

While Mr. Curzon was still at the nursing home, a representative of the California State Board of Licensing took me aside one day and asked if I was satisfied with the quality of care in this facility. She said she had been investigating and checking on this facility for several years and that they had been cited and fined many, many times. She also told me the location of the office which keeps a record, available to the public, of citations and fines levied against all nursing and convalescent homes.

I told her my whole family was indeed unhappy with the care and that I would go to look at those records. The records I saw indicated that this particular facility had been cited and fined innumerable times. The policy appeared to be- pay the fine, hire more personnel, receive an O.K. from the state investigators, and then immediately reduce the number of staff to the former level --- a level of totally inadequate care. This happened over and over again. The records on file at the state licensing bureau indicated this facility has received citations and been fined so many times over a period of years it is shocking.

When my husband's condition was finally stabilized, after ten days in the hospital, I found another convalescent home which had a bed available for a Medical/Medicare funded patient. The care he received in this facility was so compassionate and professional that I firmly believe my husband would have lived longer and certainly would never have suffered the agony he did if I had been able to place him there at the outset.

Because convalescent/nursing homes can represent large profit margins, some unscrupulous owners/operators hire too few, often untrained personnel, who are unable to provide even a minimum of basic care for patients.

Unfortunately, my husband's experience is far from unusual. If by giving this testimony I can assist in reducing or eliminating some of the horrors my husband suffered, and my family witnessed, then my time and yours will not have been wasted.

