

*J Nurs Care Qual*

Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 8-9

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## Quality Improvement in Long-term Care

Readers can now turn to the *Journal of Nursing Care Quality* for up-to-date information on quality improvement in long-term care. Columns will examine quality concerns across the long-term care continuum: home care, housing with services, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes.

# Quality Concerns in Assisted Living Facilities

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**A**SSISTED living facilities are the long-term care choice of approximately 1 million older Americans.<sup>1</sup> Assisted living facilities provide personal care assistance and supportive services in a homelike environment to older adults who are no longer able to live independently, but who do not require the care provided in skilled nursing facilities.<sup>2</sup> The number of assisted living facilities in the United States grew rapidly in the 1990s to approximately 30,000 to 40,000,<sup>1</sup> but because standards and regulations have not kept pace with that growth, there are concerns for the quality of care in assisted living facilities.

Unlike skilled nursing facilities where federal regulations define the rights of residents and the standards of care, assisted living facilities lack a federal regulatory standard that would apply throughout the United States. Instead, each state has developed regulations and a licensure mechanism for this level of care. Among the states there are considerable differences within the sets of regulations, differences that begin with the very names applied to these facilities. Although some states used the name *assisted living facility*, other states' regulations use names such as *resi-*

*dential care facility, board and care home, and personal care home.*<sup>3</sup> Variations among the states' regulations for assisted living facilities extend beyond names and encompass the process of becoming a licensed facility, qualifications of administrators and other staff including nursing staff, staff to resident ratios, services, and discharge criteria.

The lack of a consensus among states' regulations and the absence of a national regulatory standard create confusion about assisted living facilities for health care providers and consumers. To add to the confusion, congregate housing programs for older adults sometimes market their supportive services as *assisted living services*. Assisted living services in congregate housing may include meals, housekeeping, laundry, and even intermittent assistance with personal care. Assisted living facilities differ in that, in addition to meals, housekeeping, and laundry, assisted living facility staff is available 24-hours a day for routine personal care and medication management or administration. The assisted living facility staff is also available to assist with unscheduled and unanticipated needs in a setting that is homelike rather than institutional.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the lack of consensus in regulations, 4 other features of assisted living facilities contribute to quality concerns: the absence of a national standard for comprehensive resident assessment and care planning, the absence of nationally recognized quality indicators, limited research related to assisted

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living facilities and their residents, and the limited involvement of registered nurses (RN) in assisted living facilities. An assisted living version of the Minimum Data Set (MDS) instrument used in skilled nursing facilities has been developed but is not in general use.<sup>5</sup> Quality indicators have not been developed for assisted living facilities as they have been developed for skilled nursing facilities; however, an instrument to measure assisted living facility (residential care facility) quality is under development by the MDS Quality Improvement Program at Sinclair School of Nursing, University of Missouri-Columbia.<sup>6</sup> Although the number of citations of research related to assisted living facilities is growing in the electronic bibliographic databases, reports of nursing research in assisted living facilities are still scarce. Lastly, some state regu-

lations do not require the involvement of RNs in assisted living facilities.<sup>7</sup> The absence or limited involvement of RNs in assisted living facilities deprives residents of nursing knowledge and skills in assessment, coordination of care, medication management, and health promotion.

Even without the support of regulations, RNs, the current body of gerontological nursing knowledge, and the slowly growing pool of research findings related to assisted living facilities and residents could contribute to the quality of care, safety, and comfort of older adult residents of assisted living facilities. Future columns will continue to examine quality concerns across the long-term care continuum: home care, housing with services, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes.

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