

They deserve better

By **PRESSLEY HENNINGSEN**

Commentary

I'm a trial attorney. In the last 10 years, I've represented the families of Iowans who — due to carelessness, neglect and outright abuse — die prematurely or are severely injured in nursing homes.

I wish I could tell you Iowa nursing homes place such a high premium on safety that preventable, devastating and often deadly acts are almost unheard of. Sadly, this is not the case — not by a long shot.

The family of a Cedar Rapids woman named Marlys recently discovered this first hand.

Marlys and her mother were especially close. Her mother was blind most of her life, so Marlys was her mother's eyes. With age, health issues such as diabetes became unmanageable without 24/7 care, so her mother moved into a nursing home. Everyone thought that would be the safest thing.

Marlys visited the nursing home nearly every day, but depended on the home to manage her mother's health, especially her diet. Yet staff consistently fed Marlys' mother carbohydrate- and sugar-rich food, which is dangerous for diabetics.

One night, her mother suffered a severe blood sugar crisis. Her breathing and pulse stopped; she required immediate intervention.

Marlys' mother had requested all reasonable measures to keep her alive, and medical professionals are trained in how to resuscitate a patient in this situation.

None of the staff was clear on the nursing home's own policies for CPR and other life-sustaining interventions. So that night more than six nurses and aides gathered

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around Marlys' mother, like deer in headlights, and stood by as Marlys' mother died.

What happened was preventable and tragic. But it is just one of hundreds of examples of the dreadfully inadequate standards of care in Iowa's nursing home industry.

This industry needs stronger supervision. Yet, over the past few months the Branstad administration has cut one-quarter of the state's nursing home inspectors and half the state's senior abuse prosecutors. Since he took office, the state's "independent" long-term care ombudsman seems to be missing in action when it comes to advocating for nursing home residents.

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The state regulators should be reinstated immediately. But Iowans shouldn't be given the false impression that tighter regulation

will automatically fix the nursing home industry.

Iowans must look beyond the government that regulates the industry and shine a light on the industry itself. It's a scary sight.

The industry has in large part been taken over by massive corporate money-making machines.

A global investment firm called The Carlyle Group recently flipped Manor Care, one of the country's largest for-profit nursing home chains operating in Iowa, for a multi-billion-dollar profit.

Iowa's largest for-profit, assisted-living chain, Emeritus, was started by wine magnates from Washington state.

The industry is being re-designed to cut costs, cut corners and balloon profits. Perhaps this is a solid business model for selling widgets, but not so sound or ethical if you are caring for the elderly.

Even many of Iowa's so-called "not-for-profit" care centers practice this way.

The nursing home industry has transformed for the worse. And judging by the actions of Iowa politicians, the industry has bought the political clout to stay that way.

Most nursing home residents don't vote or contribute to political campaigns, so it might be easy for politicians to write them off. But they deserve better, and it is on us to be their voice.

Someday, it may be our parents in that vulnerable situation — or us.

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