

Iowa's nursing home residents deserve better care

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 discovered this firsthand. Her mother was blind most 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.

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, nurses and aides 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, Gov. Terry Branstad's administration has cut one quarter of the state's nursing home inspectors and half the state's senior abuse prosecutors.

Last year, the nursing home industry reported a 19 percent jump in incident complaints. Branstad's response was to cut nursing homes some slack, jeopardizing the safety of our elders.

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.

The industry has in large part been taken over by massive corporate moneymaking 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 redesigned 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 "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.

Some day, it may be our parents in that situation — or us.

Pressley Henningsen is an attorney with the Riccolo & Semelroth Law Firm in Cedar Rapids and a vice president of the Iowa Association for Justice. Comments: phenningsen@riccololaw.com

GUEST COLUMN



Pressley Henningsen