

# My home life

Promoting quality in care homes for older people Spring 2012

## What makes life good in care homes now?

What could make them  
better and how might  
we get there?

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For the  
Public

# Good practice in care homes – what is the evidence?

Despite the negative press surrounding care homes, it's important to recognise the good care that goes on day-in and day-out. Most homes are striving to deliver good practice by working with their residents, family members, staff, and the local community to improve the lives of older people, who can no longer be independent in their own home.

But what does good practice look like? Many of us find it difficult to assess the quality of a care home. We might focus on those very tangible things that we can see: beautiful carpets, spacious rooms, a lovely garden. While these may help, the evidence suggests it's *the little things that count* and, in particular, the quality of relationships that older people have with staff, relatives and the wider community, that is at the heart of good practice.

This bulletin offers just a few examples of what to look out for in a care home. It also suggests what you can do, as a relative or member of the public, to help staff deliver quality in care homes.



## What is *My Home Life*?

**My Home Life** is a UK-wide initiative promoting quality of life for those living, dying, visiting and working in care homes for older people, through relationship-centred care and evidence-based practice. We now need the support of the wider public. JOIN US!

Email us your details at [mhl@city.ac.uk](mailto:mhl@city.ac.uk) or join us via our website ([www.myhomelife.org.uk](http://www.myhomelife.org.uk)) to link up with others who care about sharing best practice in care homes.



**My Home Life** is led by Age UK in partnership with City University, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and Dementia UK; MHL has the support of the Relatives and Residents Association, together with all the national provider organisations that represent care homes across the UK: National Care Forum, English Community Care Association, Registered Nursing Home Association, National Care Association, Care Forum Wales, Scottish Care and Independent Health and Care Providers in Northern Ireland.



# 1 Managing transitions

**Most of us would wish to be cared for in our own home, but increasing physical, mental and social frailty in older age does not always make this the best option.**

Moving into a care home is a major transition in life which may involve considerable losses but, with appropriate planning and support, it can bring benefits and improved quality of life for older people and their families. Many older people regain confidence and begin to 'thrive' when they start their new supported life in a care home.

For relatives, it is important that they can contribute to decisions being made about their loved one's care and are supported to deal with the emotional impact of the move on them and their loved one.



## CaseStudy

### Thalia Gaskell, Corner House, Clacton, Essex

Like many residents, Mrs Price came to us from hospital, so she didn't get the opportunity to say goodbye to her own home. With time and patience we helped her to collect her 'treasures' from home: her Victorian bed, her shelving unit, photos, ornaments and memories. Like many residents (and their relatives), Mrs Price found it hard to come and tell us when she felt unhappy with things. So we were persistent in checking with her – 'What can we do?' 'What haven't we done?' Where necessary, we would adjust our practices and systems to fit in with her routines and preferences. It does take time for a care home to feel like a resident's 'own home'. I am sure that if we hadn't devoted time to Mrs Price, to build up a trusting relationship right from the beginning, it would have been much harder for her to adjust in the long term.

## 2 Maintaining identity

**Given the considerable losses that older people experience when moving to a care home (loss of health, family, community, home); there is a real risk that older people can lose their sense of identity and self-esteem. Care homes can play a major role in helping residents regain a sense of worth.**

Many care homes make real efforts to learn about the older people they care for; not just in terms of their current needs, but also, about their interests, strengths and whole life history. This can help them engage with older people in a more meaningful and positive way.



## Regaining a sense of purpose

Mr Matthews was proving to be difficult to accommodate in an elderly psychiatric ward because of his aggressive behaviour towards staff. He arrived at the care home and, although unable to verbally articulate his needs, staff noted his history as a

handyman and so supported him to take on a role in decorating the care home (with help from the care home's own staff); as a result, Mr Matthews regained a sense of purpose in his life.

Did you know? .....

**Two Thirds of older people living in care homes have some form of cognitive impairment or dementia.**

## 3 Creating communities

**Care homes have been described as 'islands of the old' - we tend to think about 'them' not 'us', even when we know we will also grow old and frail!**

Quality of life can be enhanced by creating a sense of community, both within the

care home, and between the care home and its local community. Links with local organisations, such as schools or voluntary groups, can be very helpful to older people and also rewarding for those that visit.



## Dennis Norman (relative)

My wife Linda is in a care home. In 2002 she suffered severe brain damage. Eventually she came to this care home. It's been a hard change. I felt so guilty about it but also relieved that I don't have so much pressure on me.

I visit most days, but seeing Linda in that condition can get me upset.

So we relatives help each other. A daughter of another resident does Linda's nails and chats with her, while I try to help others. I suppose I am as much a volunteer, as a relative.

I help with the big things, like building the pond in the garden, and with the little things, like helping Bill to get to the local shop, or buying Stan, who is paralysed down one side, an expandable strap for his watch so that he can get it on by himself.

Because I spend time with these residents, I have learned to pick up when they are upset or frustrated about things. The way I look at things, I don't treat them as residents and staff. I treat them all as people who I have built up trust with. I know that they appreciate me coming to see them. And you know what? It does me good!



## 4 Sharing decision-making

**For many, going into a care home can feel like a move away from being in control of one's own life. Collective living with others can be a new experience for many and the importance of feeling involved in decision-making in relation to both their care and the wider running of the home, should not be underestimated.**

In some care homes, older people get involved in maintaining the garden, being responsible for pets, helping out with housekeeping, planning the décor, recruiting staff and carrying out internal audits.



### Did you know?

**An estimated 40,000 older people in care homes in England have no regular contact with people outside of the care home.**

● **Its My Home Life... Alison Wood, care home resident and My Home Life champion, who sadly died in December 2011 tells us what is important to her:**

“Managers, I think, are vital to the running of any residential establishment. Everybody says don’t form too close relationships with staff; but if you and the staff can’t find each other, at some kind of level, I think that doesn’t make for a good care home.

People responsible for organising the homes don’t always understand that they are taking on a person’s lifetime. Staff have to have some idea of what that person really is, who they really are. Inviting people to have a say about their lives makes them feel more human; existence becomes a little less down the scale; you still feel that you are contributing something to the common life of where you are. Some of the residents, like the staff, have very considerable characters and have lived very interesting lives. You are the sum of all the things that have happened to you in your life which have brought you to who you are now.”



## 5 Improving health and healthcare

**Older people living in care homes have substantial and complex healthcare needs which require the full range of healthcare services.**

They should have access to the same healthcare they would be entitled to if they were living in their own homes. Health can also be improved by spending time with residents in personally meaningful and enjoyable ways.



### Did you know?

**There are more 'care home beds' than 'hospital beds' across the UK.**



## 6 Supporting good end-of-life



Care homes are places where all residents live and where many will ultimately die. Many homes have excellent skills in supporting end of life. In society, there is a real taboo about talking about dying and death, but it is important to have opportunities for discussion around this subject at a time conducive to older people.

### “My Friend Betty”

- Words from a care home resident about a friend who died in the same care home.

*“Betty had been very poorly for a couple of days, and in the middle of the night the staff came and woke me up and said “We think Betty hasn’t got long. Do you want to come and say goodbye to her?” So I put my dressing-gown on and went down the corridor and they left me with her. I climbed on the bed next to her and put my arms around her and told her what a good friend she had been to me. She died in my arms’*

## 7 Keeping the workforce fit for purpose

**The workforce in care homes is often expected to deliver quality with limited resources. Many feel undervalued given the stigma attached to the work. Their need for on-going support and encouragement from us all, along with proper training, is vital.**

## 8 Promoting a positive culture

A positive culture in a care home is one where routines and structures revolve around the older person rather than simply fit with the needs of the organisation. A good atmosphere in the home is based upon positive relationships, mutual appreciation and some blurring of roles between staff, residents and relatives.



# Top tips for supporting care homes - to deliver quality

## What you can do !

### Members of the public

1. Why not offer your time to volunteer in a care home in some capacity, whether this is playing games, reading to residents, doing odd-jobs or helping the home make connections to various community groups that might benefit the residents.
2. Get friends and others to donate music, presents - anything that creates positive stimulation or a connection to the outside world
3. Stay in touch with neighbours and friends who have moved into a care home by visiting or helping them to connect on-line
4. Start thinking about what you might want in the future as you grow old and make plans now

### For family members

5. Help the older person going into a care home to have proper time to say goodbye to their old home and sort out their personal affairs
6. Bring in items, photos, objects to help staff better 'connect' with the older person from the perspective of their

strengths, interests and their whole life history

7. Let the manager know the role that you want to play both in supporting your loved one, and in helping out more generally with activities in the home.
8. Work in positive partnership with staff to access the type of care and support from the wider community and health services that would benefit your loved one
9. Consider your own needs for support and information both in helping you engage with older people with high levels of frailty and in supporting you cope with any feelings or emotions that you are experiencing in relation to your loved one's move to the home
10. Engage in an open dialogue about end of life and support the care home to celebrate, mourn and remember those who have died
11. Recognise that good practice is based upon positive relationships between residents, staff, relatives and the wider community. Communicate your immediate concerns, but also, value the staff's efforts to meet the needs of all their residents

## Getting Advice and Support

Age UK have a large library of leaflets that can be found at: [www.ageuk.org.uk/publications](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/publications)

**Advice and support is also available on:**

Age UK: **0800 169 6565**

Cruse Bereavement Care: **0844 477 9400**

Alzheimer's Society helpline: **0845 300 0336**

Admiral Nursing Hotline (dementia support): **0845 257 9406**