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Make an informed nursing home decision

Making the decision to have a loved one enter a nursing home is a traumatic, gut-wrenching choice, even for those who are planning to be temporary resident. Recently the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) released quality ratings for nursing homes across the country based upon a five star system, more familiar to the consumer as ratings for hotels and motels. However, unlike the decision as to what temporary lodging to use for a vacation, this rating system should only be one tool in the decision making process relative to nursing home care.

In a press release on December 18, 2008, CMS Acting Administrator Kerry Weems, announced that "Our goal in developing this unprecedented quality rating system is to provide families a straightforward assessment of nursing home quality, with meaningful distinctions between high and low performing homes. The new information will also help consumers and families identify important questions to ask nursing homes and challenge nursing homes to improve their quality of care." The rating system list can be found at www.medicare.gov/NHCompare.

Although the new rating system is a radical change and provides useful information, there are several consumer groups who are not as excited by the new rating system as you might think. The Center for Medicare Advocacy senior policy attorney, Toby Edelman, pointed out that two of the three quality measures used for the ratings are self reported by the nursing homes themselves, that is staffing data and quality measures. As such, the nursing homes are asked to self describe accurately how they are doing. The third quality measure is based upon health inspection surveys. The nursing home industry itself is less than pleased. Bruce Yarwood, president of the American Health Care Association, a long term care industry trade group, told *USA Today* that the new rating system is "a complex and inaccurate system that fails to provide the consumer with an appropriate tool to measure quality of care in our nation's nursing homes."

Choosing a nursing home is a difficult and often confusing decision. The Medicare compare website should just be **one** step in the process. Nothing replaces an actual visit or visits to the facility. Talk with your physician or your loved one's physician, the nursing home state ombudsman, and the state survey and certification office. When you visit the facility, do not just speak with the administrator. Talk with staff, patients, and family members of patients. Consult an experience elder law attorney if payment options for the facility is a question. If you can involve your loved one, consult with them also. Many times the decision is hurried, and will depend upon availability of open beds. However, a little advance planning, when it is clear that a nursing home is in the future, utilizing all of the tools available to you, including Medicare Compare, can save a great deal of anxiety for all involved.

CMS tells us that more than 1 million Americans enter a nursing home each year. Two thirds of today's 65 years olds will require some period of long term care at some point in their lives. Make it an informed choice, albeit a difficult one.