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Nursing homes will now be rated

Many consumers choose hotels and restaurants based upon the well known “star” rating. One would expect a five star hotel or restaurant to meet or exceed expectations related to service and facilities. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has announced that nursing homes will also be rated by “stars” to help consumers choose the best nursing home for their loved ones. The acting Director of CMS, Kerry Weems, announced that the proposed ratings, from a low of one star to a high of five stars, will be posted, starting in December, on the Nursing Home Compare Web site of CMS. (The article about this announcement appeared on the *Baltimore Sun's* website at www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/bal-te.md.rating19jun19,0,4258815.story).

The CMS website (Nursing Home Compare) has extensive data available for consumers. However, it is not always easy to make accurate comparisons. The aim of the star rating system is to make the process of selecting a nursing home easier for the consumer, giving them a clear visual system for comparison. Moreover, the goal of CMS, according to Mr. Weems, is to increase pressure on nursing home owners to improve facilities so as to protect the more than 3 million people who receive nursing home services each year throughout the country.

Last November, CMS began publishing a national “watch list” of nursing homes that had failed to improve significantly. The aim was “to create the catalyst that will push health care to improve at a faster rate,” said Weems. CMS data shows that about half of the nursing homes on the watch list significantly improved their quality of care within 24 to 30 months. It is hoped that the star rating will prove to be the impetus to force more and quicker improvements as nursing homes compete for patients.

However, consumers should not rely on any rating system alone. It is still important to visit the nursing facility prior to placement of a loved one, meeting with staff, residents, and other families. Consider the location, because visits to the loved one can be the best therapy. Some lower income families may find that it is more important to choose a nursing home near a bus route rather than a home with more “stars.”

CMS has not yet decided exactly what data to use for the rating system. Under consideration is the use of data from inspections from the last three years, and measures of quality already in place, such as staffing ratios, and percentage of residents who develop bedsores. The data, and the way it gets rated is still open for discussion. Elder Law Answers (www.elderlawanswers.com) reports that the Center for Medicare Advocacy's senior staff attorney, and the president of the American Health Care Association both warn consumers that this rating system is likely to be flawed if CMS relies on inspections and quality measures reported by the nursing homes themselves as complete data.

Mr. Weems decided to advocate for the rating system after attending a hearing in which Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) asked why it was easier to compare washing machines than nursing homes. Hopefully this new type of rating system for nursing homes will make it easier to make meaningful comparisons.