
1 Information for Elderly People Moving into Residential Care: The Views of Residents

This account of the information needs of elderly people moving into residential care is based on the views of 12 residents of four homes. Most of the residents had moved in shortly before the interviews - the length of time varied from a few days to a few months.

In selecting people for interviews we tried to identify residents who could remember and could talk about the process of entering residential care. We were interested in whether and where they looked for information, what they felt they needed to know, who had given them information and advice and what information they found helpful. The interviews were designed to be as simple and flexible as possible but it has to be recognised that the questions do, nevertheless, require the interviewees to recall their experiences in some detail. It was not possible, therefore, to do full interviews with all the residents, many of whom were forgetful or confused.

Two of the homes that were involved in this part of the study provided facilities for residents to live with a considerable degree of independence. A number of the residents had decided to move in to free themselves from some of the responsibility of managing their own homes or to have more company, not because they needed the degree of care usually provided in a residential home. They are not representative of the population of elderly peoples' homes in general but they provided us with a rich and full source of information about their experiences and about their views of the information needs of elderly people in general.

How people entered residential care

The circumstances which had prompted the move into residential care fell into two groups.

For those who were most frail or confused, it was a deterioration in their health which led to the move, which was often straight from hospital. In these cases there was usually one key person involved in arranging the move - usually a member of the family - and it appears that the elderly person was very little involved in making the decision or seeking information:

I wasn't very well. I was getting meals on wheels but my daughter said 'you should go somewhere where you can get proper meals'. I wasn't very keen but my daughter enquired to several homes and liked this one. She said 'you'll be happy there, Mum' and I am.

My daughter said 'You should move to be closer to me. You can't look after yourself any more'.

I was in hospital but I couldn't look after myself any more. I'm 91. My daughter lives near here and this was the most convenient home. She travels a lot. She looked at several homes but this was the most convenient.

I was in and out of hospital a lot, and the doctor said I was ready to leave, but where was I to go? I moved very quickly due to the people at the church, but not to an area that is familiar to me.

It was not clear how much information had been available to the relatives or carers. It is important therefore to look at the account of carers' views and experiences alongside this one.

The residents who were most independent had clearly made the decision to move on their own, with little or no reference to outside sources of information and advice:

I was very keen to cope with age by myself - I wanted to get settled without feeling my sons had to put me up. I wanted to do it while I was well enough to enjoy it. I didn't know very much when I came here except I'd heard that they were fairly free here.

We used to live nearby - our neighbour had previously worked here and we used to come in on open days. We had retired and were discussing our future - it was our own decision to come, there was no outside suggestion.

I've got no family and I can't be bothered to do my own housework and so on. I've been here for 18 months, before that I was in another home for a few years. Then it changed hands and I decided to move - I'd seen an advert for this place.

Finding out about the home

For those residents who had been actively involved in selecting the home they went to, previous knowledge of it was often a key factor in the decision. The ways in which they had found out about the home were often accidental:

My sister was ill. We came to visit someone here and I said we ought to put our names down on the list. When she died I came here. I wanted to be free to come and go, but it's a great thing not to be a burden to my relatives. We came here to see someone and were very impressed - liked the atmosphere.

I moved down here to be with my brother. He retired to this area and I used to come here on holiday. We'd seen this place as we passed.

I'd been in contact with this home for years and already knew quite a lot about it. I knew it was a very caring place. I'd known [the wardens] for years and I knew they stressed independence. They persuaded me to come for Christmas and I stayed.

Visiting the home and getting a favourable impression were the most valuable sources of information to prospective residents. None mentioned written information such as leaflets or guides:

I came to have a look. Everyone chatted to me and was very friendly. I had a look at the room. They just seemed happy.

My daughter-in-law came with me to look around. I thought that the rooms were very small but had a nice feeling. I went on the waiting list and was accepted in three months. Then I had a chance to go round again.

When I was looking for a place for my sister we did visit some places. We got a list from the advice bureau, I think, and discarded some because of their name or position, then visited a few. The reception we got had a very important part to play.

Some of the residents had known about the homes over a period and had time to plan the move and feel confident about the decision they were making:

We came on open days and visited people we knew.

It was so close we knew a lot about it. We'd been told their attitude of mind was the right one. Here you still have your home and can do as you like.

Access to information and advice

Apart from their knowledge of the individual homes, none of the residents appears to have had access to much information about residential care, either from professionals and advisers with whom they had contact or by seeking information from any other sources. For one resident the doctor had been the key adviser, but none of the others said their doctors had given them information about residential care:

I made up my mind because he was the doctor here. I'd had him for years and he'd been a great support to me. I was swayed because he is the medical officer here.

None of the residents said they had any contact with or information from health workers, social workers or other care professionals concerning their move to residential care. Similarly, none of them said they had approached any other organisations or sources of information for help. This may be because they do not know where to go or do not consider the possibility of seeking information from a source apart from the home itself. None of them could suggest any sources of information, apart from the home itself, to a friend who might be considering residential care.

It appears that the process of seeking information is in itself associated with loss of independence:

I'm very casual - I won't be of much help to you - even if I knew the places to go for information I wouldn't go. You just have to be very observant and assess the value of people's comments. But I would never ask 'do you think I will be happy there?' You just have to get to know the area and the people who've been there.

It was my own decision entirely. I've been very independent.

No-one would tell me what to do.

One of the residents commented on the difficulty of getting people to seek and use information, and to realise how important it can be when making a major decision:

Publicity is very difficult. People don't take it in unless they are interested. They need people to tell them things - not everyone asks questions so they need personal contact at

meetings, talks and so on to make them realise they need information and what is available. People don't know about social security support but there are all sorts of opportunities to find out.

Key issues

Information and decision-making

Many elderly people are not actively involved in the decisions about moving into residential care. They are dependent on someone else making the arrangements for them. This might be a member of their family or someone else such as a social worker or friend. These people therefore need access to the necessary information and to information about the preferences and needs of the elderly person.

This does not mean that information is not important to the prospective residents themselves. Visits to the home before moving in seem to be particularly important.

For those elderly people who make the independent decision to move, previous knowledge of the home and sufficient time and opportunity to build up a picture of life there seem to be of great importance. This opportunity often arises by accident and leads to a happy outcome. However, two questions are raised. First, is it possible to give more people the opportunity to consider information about residential care over a longer period? Second, does it matter that people often have access to information about a very limited number of homes, possibly only the one or two that take their interest?

Information and independence

It appears that the deliberate seeking of information or requests for help may be associated with fears about loss of independence or privacy. This is an obstacle to any attempt to make information more easily available and to encourage people to use more information.

It may be that a clearer distinction needs to be presented between information and 'help' or 'service' which imply more involvement and, possibly, interference. Certainly, independent people who are not already receiving support services do not have access to information through their contact with the service providers. This, as we have seen, is an important source for many people. Those not already receiving support may therefore need to have access to information in a way that does not appear to them to threaten their independence.