

Race can be an issue in nursing homes

THE SERIES



Toronto journalist Judy Steed has been writing about social issues for 30 years. Last fall, she embarked on a one-year project to document the most pressing policy implications of our aging society as part of the 2008 Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy.

She has visited dozens of nursing homes and interviewed hundreds of health-care workers, policy-makers and seniors to present this weeklong portrait.

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[Experts estimate that at least 10 per cent of seniors are abused. Now Toronto has a safe haven for those who need it.](#)

UNIQUE TENSION: In the world's most multicultural city, the patient is often white, while the low-paid job of personal support worker often goes to a visible minority. Racism rears its ugly head more than we'd like to think

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JUDY STEED SPECIAL TO THE STAR

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It's the dark side of life in nursing homes: elderly residents who punch, kick, hit and bite their personal care workers. Residents who spit and curse and call their workers unspeakable names.

"I love my residents and most of them appreciate me," says Eulalie Thompson, a Toronto personal support worker who has worked in nursing homes for more than 30 years.

"But, every day, somebody acts out, hits, calls me 'black bitch, nigger.' What can you do?"

Toronto nursing homes have a unique tension: Older residents were born into a time when racism and bigotry were more common and interaction among people of different races and cultures was rare.

But in the world's most multicultural city, the lower-paid job of personal support worker often goes to a visible minority. The clientele is often white.

"In the GTA, this is a multicultural, non-white workforce," says John van Beek, a spokesperson for

Service Employees International Union Local 1, whose 50,000 members are dedicated to health care and community services.

"When you have a limited amount of time to get 16 people up, washed and dressed and into the dining room for breakfast, and you've got demented Alzheimer's patients, of course it's going to be tricky."

As he sees it, the personal support workers are rushed and the residents understandably get upset. "My dad was in a nursing home for the last nine months of his life, with dementia. He was 85 and if anyone approached him quickly, he would raise his cane. He was alarmed; he didn't know what was going on. He was still quite strong – and no one had ever laid a hand on him in his life."

In the course of the year-long Atkinson Fellowship to study aging, I have visited dozens of nursing homes. I've observed white elders rolling their eyes at and denigrating nursing home staff on the basis of their skin colour or accent.

"I don't like being touched by her," an elderly white woman said of a gentle caregiver who hailed from the West Indies. A man who requested my help in calling a seniors' residence hung up the phone quickly. "Did you hear that voice? I can't stand that accent. I wouldn't go to a place like that."

Frail seniors are vulnerable and dependent and can be understandably reluctant to let strangers care for them. The personal support worker's relationship with patients is highly intimate, often involving bathing, changing diapers and grooming.

Most – but not all – seniors are appreciative. In addition, there's the unpredictable impact of Alzheimer's disease, which can afflict up to half of people over 85.

"Working in Canadian long-term care is dangerous," states the opening line of a study led by York University professor Pat Armstrong.

Out of Control: Violence Against Personal Support Workers in Long-Term Care is the result of surveys and focus groups carried out by Armstrong's team of researchers over the past year.

They uncovered disturbing reports of violence aimed at Canadian nursing home workers "virtually every day."

"Violence is part of the job – we're expected to take it," says Wendy Hawthorne, 36, a personal support worker in an Ottawa-area nursing home.

"You're hit, kicked, slapped, shoved and yelled at. You get verbal abuse from family members, too. They're upset that their loved one isn't happy, isn't the same person she used to be.

"Well, we can't change that."

Armstrong's team carried out national and international comparisons, studying nursing home violence in Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Ontario; and in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

In Canada, personal support workers are almost seven times more likely to experience violence on a daily basis than workers in Nordic countries.

"Clearly," the report says, "the high level of violence in Canadian facilities is not necessary and can be reduced."

In Denmark and Sweden, I observed that the atmosphere in nursing homes was more positive and uplifting than in Canada; during the day, residents were usually clustered in common areas, interacting with staff in a relaxed way. Workers did not complain about being short-staffed – an

important factor in quality of care and working conditions, Armstrong found.

"Nordic long-term care workers also experience greater flexibility on the job and greater communication among colleagues – both factors that mitigate workplace violence."

Armstrong's study suggests the poor working conditions in Canadian nursing homes constitute "a structural violence that originates in large measure in the way long-term care is organized and funded."

Thompson, the Toronto personal support worker with 30 years' experience, would agree. She works in a 150-bed facility; the majority of residents have dementia.

"The reason they act out, usually, is due to the staff shortage; they have to wait so long for someone to come, they get frustrated and angry. I understand that."

Thompson is skilled at defusing tension.

"I'll say, 'Honey, I'm so sorry, we have to be in the dining room and if we're not, we'll be reprimanded.' Most of them understand. Every day, they tell me, 'It's not fair that you have to be so rushed.'"

But then there are the situations she can't defuse, the bubbling bursts of anger from demented residents who strike out at the nearest hand – which often happens to be hers.

She has reported some of these incidents, but "the answer always is, 'It's their sickness, their mental instability, they don't know what they're doing or saying.'"

''The implication is, we're supposed to take it, it's part of the job."

Armstrong's study noted that at one Winnipeg facility, of the estimated 15,000 incidents of violence against workers over a six-month period, less than 1 per cent were reported. Why don't workers report violence?

According to the study, workers receive little proactive training or support, they are required to fill out forms that might seem too complicated, especially if English is not their mother tongue.

And they are intimidated by a culture in which supervisors dismiss "incidents" and often treat workers as if they are to blame, as if violence is part of the job. The average wage for personal support workers in nursing homes is \$17.78 per hour.

The Ontario government is planning to introduce some form of regulation dealing with workplace violence but the SEIU's van Beek says "as long as there are staff shortages, there will be violence."

"The workers have respect for patients and want to give them comfort, but there is no time for even a 30-second chat."

Thompson says that despite the dangers, she loves her work with old people. "It's my passion."

Inconceivable, perhaps, given what she experiences day-to-day. But growing up, she was close to her mother and grandmother.

"And I recognize that I'll be old myself, one day."