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Where they go when they can't stay at home anymore

It's OK to put Alzheimer's patients in residential care facilities

BY RACHEL ALEXANDER

Many families care for their loved ones with Alzheimer's for as long as then can. Eventually, if they live long enough, the disease will progress to the point that family members are not fully equipped to handle it anymore.

In the later stages of Alzheimer's, people begin to wander and eventually they begin to lose control of their body functions. As they get more and more sick, it is often best to place them in a residential care facility with a secure dementia unit and staff that is trained to properly care for them.

Heritage Club DTC

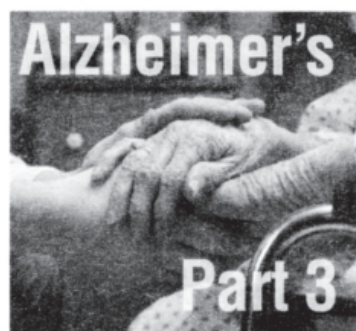
"Start looking for a home before you're in a crisis," Jill Vitale, executive director of Heritage Club DTC, advises people. "Visit places, talk to people, talk to the residents."

Heritage Club DTC has a locked memory care unit called Arbors. Currently, the small unit has 16 residents, most of who have Alzheimer's.

"It's geared toward helping them live in life as they see it," said Arbors Director Cheryl Coleman.

Caregivers in the unit play ball with residents to maintain their muscle strength, take residents on scenic outings, play word games, give massages and sing with the residents.

"We even maintain their finger nails," Coleman said. "It's a lot of



touch."

"A lot of cuing helps because they don't know where to start with a task," said Judi Bishop, wellness director for the center.

The majority of Heritage Club DTC is an assisted living home and there are several residents with early and middle stage Alzheimer's who are doing well in the setting.

Bishop recommends placing family members in assisted living as soon as they have trouble getting things done around the house.

"It's amazing how long we can keep them on the assisted living side," she said. "If they move here when they're still OK and they worsen here, they can stay here for a long time."

Vitali said, "We want to keep them as independent as they can be."

Once they start to wander, however, the staff recommends that families place them in the secure unit.

"Our greatest fear is that we won't catch [the wanderers] quick enough," Vitali said.

Bishop said, "One resident on the assisted living side is starting to wander. We're working with the daughter to move her to the secure unit. The daughter is having a hard time. You sit down with the family and point out what the loved one is

doing. I have to be very blunt with people and those are hard conversations."

The Arbors unit is a quiet place normally. Residents are allowed to wander throughout the unit without restriction and the staff works hard to interpret what is agitating them.

"Even at their most agitated state, there's a reason for it," Coleman said. "It's so interesting to get to that problem."

Holly Creek

Holly Creek Retirement Community is building a new, state-of-the-art Alzheimer's unit as part of its Phase II, which is now under construction.

This unit will have 12 apartments and will not be locked, like the Heritage Club DTC unit and other traditional Alzheimer's units. Instead, residents will wear bracelets that ring to the nurse's station if they wander beyond a certain point.

"What Holly Creek is doing does not have that atmosphere of an institution," said Tanna Pundt, director of resident services. "We're not sedating them and knocking them out anymore."

Holly Creek has other unique programs being implemented. Montessori techniques are already in use with the Alzheimer's patients living in assisted living. The tasks help restore some memory loss and bring them back to their lives, Pundt said.

With early dementia, the residents will put together gift packs for soldiers in Iraq or new mothers with baby blankets and other necessities. The tasks require thought to work through each step, which helps them focus.

"It makes them feel like they're

doing something for someone else," Pundt said.

Another unique part of Holly Creeks Alzheimer's unit will be the use of the Snoezelen (pronounced snooze-a-len) technique.

Snoezelen was developed in Holland in the 1970s to help in treating people with severe mental handicaps. Full Snoezelen rooms are specially designed to deliver stimuli to various senses, using lighting effects, color, sounds, music and scents. The rooms also usually have textured walls. Pundt said Holly Creek is currently fundraising to put in a full room but will use the theory regardless. The theory has been found to calm agitation and increase appetite.

If the full room is beyond reach, Holly Creek caregivers will use the music and light portions of the theory to help calm residents.

"We're really hoping we can actually have the room," she said. "We'll use the theory no matter what though."

Holly Creek is working with the Alzheimer's Association to educate

adult children of Alzheimer's residents about what the disease looks like and what can happen.

"We need to get them in an environment they're comfortable in," Pundt said. "The smaller the environment, the better they will be able to function."

She said a secure unit allows residents to function more as themselves and reduces confusion.

"The most important part is to let them be themselves, to not try to orient them to today, the more you try to reorient them, the more confused they get," Pundt said.

Bishop said, "Kids need to realize they need to give up the role of caring for their parents. Let us do the work and enjoy their last years, have fun. It's OK not to have to take care of them."

This is the final part in a three part series about Alzheimer's. The Villager will be featuring a different health topic series each month. E-mail Rachel Alexander at rachel@villagerpublishing.com with ideas or requests.