

A guide to nursing home guides

Consumer Reports ranks Minnesota's care. So does the state. They're looking for different things.

BY RICK LINSK
Pioneer Press

When Consumer Reports panned nine nursing homes in Minnesota and praised 17 others in a report released last month, alert readers might have noticed something puzzling.

Some of the nursing homes the magazine labeled poor performers had decent scores on Minnesota's official nursing home report card. On the other hand, the state gave poor ratings to some of the facilities Consumer Reports recommended.

Who's right?

It turns out consumers can sort of trust both studies — if they understand what went into producing them. Both reports are based on data, though some of their sources and weightings differ. Neither paints the whole picture of a nursing home, but both can be valuable starting points in the decision where to place Mom or Dad.

The Consumer Reports system "certainly is a credible tool people could use," said Darcy Miner, director of compliance monitoring for the Minnesota Department of Health. "But hopefully, nobody would make a decision where to place someone based on any one tool, no matter what it is."

Consumers must supplement the information they initially gather with visits to care facilities and interviews with residents, their family members and nursing home employees.

"There's no substitute for that on-site verification, no matter what the written records say," Miner said.

Tom Hyder, executive director of the ElderCare Rights Alliance, a Bloomington-based advocacy group, said he trusts the Consumer Reports findings. The reports, which are mostly available at the magazine's Web site, are carefully constructed and can help families narrow the list of facilities they are planning to visit, he said.

This is the seventh year that Consumer Reports has spotlighted poor-performing nursing homes. But it's the first report since Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Minnesota health officials released a state nursing home report card. The federal government also has a Web site full of nursing home performance information.

The now-abundant information sources are a mixed blessing for consumers.

"The good news is that they are out there. The bad news is that there are so many," Hyder said.

Some of the differences between the state and Consumer Reports can be traced to a long-running debate about the way government oversees nursing home care.

At least once a year, the state health department inspects nursing homes, applying a thick rulebook meant to ensure care meets federal standards.

The state inspectors write their observations, sometimes in excruciating detail, and issue violations when care or conditions fall short. In addition, the state collects information about nursing home staffing and about nursing home residents' health. All those measurements are turned into a huge database.

The industry in recent years has nitpicked the reliability of the inspection data, charging that inspection teams in some parts of Minnesota are tougher than others. But Consumer Reports wasn't impressed by those claims, said Trudy Lieberman, a longtime investigative reporter and author of the magazine's piece.

"Consumer Reports has done this rating in the same way we rate cars and everything else — using our criteria and objective analysis," she said.

The data couldn't support ratings for every nursing home, so the magazine only produced best and worst lists for every state, Lieberman said. The magazine urged consumers to avoid nine care facilities in Minnesota, including two in Minneapolis, one in Rochester and four in the northeastern corner of the state. No east metro establishments made that list.

Consumer Reports also named 12 nursing homes in the United States that have been poor performers for five consecutive years, including the Rochester facility and another in Duluth.

Overall, the analysis found that subpar care persists at many nursing homes and that some state agencies have failed to do more to spur improvements. That's a national disgrace, Lieberman said.

On the plus side, three nursing homes in St. Paul and one in North St. Paul were among those recommended.

The state report card takes a broader view than Consumer Reports.

First, the report card includes all of Minnesota's 400-plus nursing homes. Second, it grades the facilities based on eight different measures, five more areas than Consumer Reports used.

"I have to confess that I'm biased, since I helped to design it, but it was developed after consultation with a wide variety of groups, and it certainly pushes the envelope as to how you measure quality," said Robert Kane, a University of Minnesota professor who studies long-term care.

"It gives high salience to quality of life, which to me is the trump issue."

The state report card is not without controversy. It gave 94 percent of nursing homes the highest rating for their inspection reports. However, a nursing home could have many violations and still get the highest ratings.

"That particular measure is worthless," said Hyder, the advocate for nursing home residents.

In the report card's favor, it features links that consumers can follow to view nursing homes' full inspection reports.

The Consumer Reports results were based on data as of September 2005. The magazine highlighted the results in its September issue, which hit newsstands in August, and published most of the data online. It has prompted grumbles from facilities that claim improvement.

"We had to cut it off at some point and get ready to publish," Lieberman said.

In August, some residents of Rochester Health and Rehabilitation East and their family members vented frustration at a public forum organized by Rep. Fran Bradley, R-Rochester.

Bradley said last week he had just mailed information about Rochester East to Consumer Reports, hoping for a retraction or at least future refinements to the methodology.

"I didn't conclude that this is the premier or the best nursing home in Minnesota, but it didn't deserve to be designated among the (national) deficient dozen," Bradley said.

State health official Darcy Miner said the Rochester facility has improved drastically after several years of turmoil under previous owners. Since the Beverly chain took over in late 2003, she said, "the issues have been going down."

Last year, the state found 12 deficiencies at Rochester East. None caused "actual harm," but the health department had concerns about infection control, a lack of activities for some residents, and a resident given insomnia medication for more than three years.

Bob Nord, whose wife was a resident of the nursing home before she died 2½ years ago and who continues to volunteer there, said Rochester East has thrived with new management, new staff and improved facilities. "It's been quite a change," he said.

Along with Rochester East, Viewcrest Health Center in Duluth made the magazine's national list of chronic offenders. Viewcrest had 17 deficiencies last year, 28 in 2004 and 22 the year before — far above the state average. Among the 2004 violations were two that caused harm to residents, including failure to prevent and treat residents' pressure sores.

The magazine's ratings were well received at the Cerenity Residence on Humboldt, a 30-bed nursing home specializing in short-stay rehabilitation. Cerenity threw a party and made T-shirts commemorating its placement on the "consider" list.

"I think it's an honor to be on that report," said Peter Schuna, administrator of the four-year-old facility. "Consumer Reports puts a lot of people and time into coming up with those ratings. From our standpoint, we're excited."

Cerenity had no violations in 2004 or 2005 state inspections.

Consumer Reports' research found that not-for-profit nursing homes generally provide better care than for-profit facilities. Cerenity is co-owned by three not-for-profit organizations: the Benedictine Health System, the HealthEast Care System and Milwaukee-based Clement Manor.

"We're here to serve a mission and serve the residents and do that forever on into the future," Schuna said. "By having that focus, the financials just come along. The money we do make, we reinvest into 25-year-old roofs and other building things that go wrong."

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Nursing home tips

Experts' advice in shopping for a nursing home:

Assess your needs: What do you, or your family member, want and need from a nursing home?

Check nursing home information on the Web (addresses below).

Read state inspection reports.

Visit your finalists.

Observe the facility and how employees and residents interact.

Interview residents and their family members. Are they happy? Do they look clean, comfortable and well groomed?

Talk to the staff. Do they have enough help? Is their input factored into care decisions? Do they have the proper training? What is staff turnover like?

Online

Information about specific facilities and the search process is available at:

- Consumer Reports Nursing Home Guide, www.consumerreports.org (Click on the "Health & Fitness" link; then click on "Special section: Nursing home guide.")
- Minnesota Nursing Home Report Card, www.health.state.mn.us/nhreportcard
- Federal government's Nursing Home Compare, www.medicare.gov/NHCompare

— Rick Linsk