

'Perfect' home that just didn't care

Feeling guilty at putting her mum into a home, *Tamara Sturtz-Filby* thought she'd found the best one. She was quite wrong

I never imagined my mother would end up in a care home. She was one of the strongest women I have known, a psychotherapist passionate about helping people. She lived on her own (my parents divorced when I was very young), and was incredibly independent. When I was growing up, she always said to me: "Whatever you do, never put me into a home." But that is exactly what I did.

As revealed by the *Telegraph* this week, the "postcode lottery" in dementia care means patients are four times more likely to receive poor care in some parts of the country than in others. The guilt about putting a loved one in a care home and the anxiety about getting it right are uppermost in your mind if you ever find yourself having to make such a decision for a loved one.

At the age of 72, my mother started showing signs of dementia. At first it was simply forgetting days of the week, but before long she was losing her car and forgetting the way to familiar places. She also became erratic, phoning me 24 times on one day and becoming confused over simple tasks. However, none of us was prepared for the speed of her decline. In months, she was sectioned on a mental health ward.

I am an only child, but with a young family of my own, I could not become my mother's carer. It would change our lives to a degree that would be intolerable. Although professionals, friends and family members all thought I was doing the right thing, I was still racked with guilt. I was also very naive.

In my head I had an image of a care home as a Victorian manor house with oak staircases and grand

bedrooms. I thought it was a myth that homes smelt of wee and boiled cabbage, but after looking round one, my coat smelled so strongly of "lunch" that I had to send it to the dry cleaners. I also thought neglect and abuse were something you only heard about on the news. I was wrong.

After researching, I visited six local care homes and I thought I had chosen well. The building, overlooking Bath, was so beautiful and well kept, the gardens so inviting, that I was taken in. The home also specialised in dementia. And my questions were answered with well-rehearsed precision. Did the home focus on person-centred care? Tick. Was the food home-cooked? Tick. Were there activities? Tick. Was the television on all the time? No. Tick.

Unfortunately, I didn't think to ask whether my mother would be taken



The home in Bath where Tamara's mother now lives and is properly cared for

Tamara Sturtz-Filby with her mother, Jane, who is now happy after coming through her ordeal

out of the building, if she would be ignored; would she have regular baths and would her toenails be cut? And most importantly, would she be safe?

At £750 a week, the home would give my mother top quality care, I thought. Because she was sectioned, she is paid for by the NHS under Section 117, which turned out to be a huge blessing in disguise, as, like so many families, I would have had to have sold her assets to pay the fees.

For the first two weeks, all seemed well. My mother appeared to be content in her new surroundings. However, within a few weeks I noticed she had lost weight and was looking drawn and pale. I arrived one Sunday morning and all the residents were watching *Jeremy Kyle*, with no member of staff in sight.

Things went from bad to worse. My mother started banging on doors in tears, screaming at staff and throwing herself onto the floor in rage, only to be ignored or told that she was upsetting the other residents. Her ankles were swollen and she shuffled and wheezed when she walked. She was labelled as "challenging" and "attention-seeking". I was made to feel that she was an inconvenience.

Apart from the occasional walk

round the car park, the garden was never used. I visited almost daily, taking my mother out for hours at a time. When I dropped her off she would cry. It was heartbreaking.

She was put on anti-psychotic drugs and responded by smearing herself and her room with faeces, some of which I found two days later in her bedside drawer. According to the Department of Health, one third of dementia patients are inappropriately prescribed anti-psychotic drugs. "They do it to make their lives easier," a member of staff confided.

My mother's hair was generally unwashed and she wore the same clothes day after day. There were days when only one member of staff was on duty for 13 hours, with 12 residents. I fought to get social services to agree to move my mother. I found another care home that was a five-minute drive from my house. There was no oak staircase and no garden, but it had a wonderful reputation. There was a waiting list. We waited for months.

The last straw was when my mother was involved in a fight and was pulled to the floor by her hair by another resident. They had been left unattended, and staff were only alerted by the sound of screaming. I took the incident to social services and the CQC (Care Quality Commission), and finally action was taken. Four days later, my mother moved out.

FINDING A CARE HOME WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Pay attention to detail.

Are residents' fingernails clean, are their clothes stained, do they look underweight, do their clothes match? If there's a garden, is there anyone in it

Ask questions.

What's the home's policy on anti-psychotic and sleeping drugs? How often do residents have a bath or shower? Do they go out every day and

what are the resources for this?

Talk to other families.

Ask for your details to be passed on for personal references.

Talk to social services

Ask them if there are any issues with the home, and check the CQC's latest inspection report: www.cqc.org.uk, alzheimers.org.uk

Within weeks, the care home was issued a Warning Notice for breaching legal requirements including safeguarding issues not being reported, staff not understanding what abuse was and showing a lack of understanding about how to treat

people with dementia. Since last year, the home has made huge improvements. It is under new management and has passed its most recent CQC inspection. It's just a shame that this came too late for my mother.

In her new home things were immediately different. Within two days she had put on make-up for the first time in eight months. The staff were kind and loving, looked my mother in the eye when they talked to her; they gave her their attention and made her feel at home.

Sadly, the care home has had to close, but fortunately all the staff have moved to another small care home and my mother was able to go with them. She has settled well after only a month.

It's not rocket science. My mother is shown nothing but patience and compassion; she goes out every day, whether it's to the bank or Waitrose, has an account at the local newsagent, gets her hair done and goes out for fish and chips. She is virtually drug-free and no longer seems to be afraid.

There will always be times when she gets confused and agitated, but these situations are dealt with lovingly and with care. And this, I believe, is how she has found her smile again. Finally, she seems happy, and I've found peace of mind.