

Browsing the Web for Long-Term Care Options

BY EMILY SOPENSKY

The inevitable happened. My mother's neighbor called me after she found my mother collapsed on the kitchen floor unable to get up. My dear mother, an octogenarian with a heart of gold, was rushed to the hospital where they found her potassium had dropped to a seriously low level. Always a risk when taking medicine for a chronically weak heart, my mother's condition was complicated by her age and deteriorating health.

Once her potassium level returns to normal, we think she should go to an ICF for her to regain her strength, they told me.

What's an ICF? What if she doesn't regain her strength, I asked.

An intermediate care facility, like a rehab clinic, they explained. It's quite possible at her age that she may not recover fully. You might start thinking about around-the-clock care options for her, they told me.

Uh-oh. My fiercely independent soul — inherited, of course, from my mother — cringed at the thought of my mother in a nursing home — permanently. It's not as if we hadn't talked about it or that she hadn't bought nursing home insurance in anticipation of this day, or that she wasn't eligible for Medicare. We had, she did, and she was. It was just that I felt so helpless. Between my siblings and me, none of us was in a position to take care of Mom in any of our own households. We knew we'd have to arrange some kind of assisted living for her. But, how and what kind?

Well, I said to myself, you make your living using computers. Why don't you make yourself and your computers useful by finding out more about nurs-

ing homes, 24-hour care, home health-care, assisted living, and so on?

So I did. Here's what I found in less than an hour.

Searching with America Online

Using America Online's AOL Netfind, I found woefully little by searching for the term nursing home. The listing of URLs (the unique address for each site) that resulted from



the search were about nursing and nursing education. By searching on nursing home businesses in Austin, Texas, I found nursing and convalescent homes near Austin. This list of nursing homes (name, address, phone numbers, mileage from the city's epicenter, and maps) is available for any city in any state. The content is provided by Switchboard, a highly recognizable Web business that specializes in directory assistance information. Please note, though, that I had to squint through several large advertise-

ments in order to actually see the listing of nursing homes.

Back to AOL Netfind. When I typed in long-term care, I got over five million possibilities! First in the list was www.mr.longtermcare.com/ltc1/index.html, where "Mr. Long-Term Care" is described as "the recipient of numerous awards and recognized as the Internet's most comprehensive source of information on long-term care and LTC insurance." I wouldn't know about the veracity of that claim, but at this site, I could indulge in real-time discussions, download recent news articles about long-term care, enter a query to search for more information or download site maps. Moving down the list of URLs and summaries listed in this search, I found one discussing the cost of nursing care. Particularly handy was a chart providing information on the costs of long-term care that I found at www.prepsmart.com/beyond/issues_ltc/analysis.html.

Several URLs were specific to a state, especially Florida, Hawaii and California, which provide homes for many retirees. Some require a password (usually for a small fee) to enter their sites. It was time to move to another search engine.

Searching with Altavista

When I used the Altavista search engine, I found oodles of information that seemed more oriented to what I was looking for — a general overview of 24-hour care with opportunities to dig deeper. I liked what I found with Nursing Home Info at www.nursing-homeinfo.com. With over 15,000 facilities listed in this nationwide nursing home directory, this site provides a comprehensive listing that is easier to

use than its Switchboard counterpart. Another useful feature not available with Switchboard was a brief description of the type of care provided by each facility.

What was particularly appealing to me, a neophyte in analyzing nursing care facilities, was a thorough, fill-in-the-blanks needs assessment tool. To begin with, financing options hinge on the physician's recommendations, the time spent in the hospital before being sent to a nursing home, and the length of stay in a skilled nursing facility (SNF) versus an intermediate care facility (ICF). What type of care that becomes eligible for Medicare is totally

with information about retirement communities throughout the world, including manufactured homes, assisted living facilities, and planned active retirement communities. To its credit, this site is updated weekly.

At www.careguide.net, I found the Health Care Financing Administration's answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) on elderly care, and I found a care guide — another list of facilities by geographic region and type of care provided.

Sharon Robinson, an RN specializing in caregiving to the elderly, provides a sample article "Nursing Home Selection Made Easy" from her

degradation of the physical facility. Just finding an adequate home that is both affordable and that can help your loved one is in and of itself quite a difficult task. Keeping track of errant homes is just as important after your loved one has been admitted to the home of choice.

Knowing my search would not be complete unless I checked out the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) site. I went to www.aarp.org. Here, the content consists mostly of pointing to AARP's own services and to those of governmental agencies. The information is good as far as it goes and it's broadbased. While there is nothing truly substantive here without a phone call, its breadth of information is good for tickling the brain and coming up with creative solutions.

Web Resources

Alzheimer's Association: www.alz.org

Answers Magazine: www.service.com/answers/cover.html

Eldercare Locator: www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/loctrnew.html

Healthcare Financing Administration: www.hcfa.gov

Internet Site on Aging: www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/webres/craig.htm

National State Units on Aging Directory: www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/state.html

NMHCA: www.nmhca.org

Senior.Com: www.senior.com

SeniorNet: www.seniornet.com

Social Security Administration: www.ssa.gov/SSA_Home.html

THCA: www.txhca.org

Veterans Administration: www.va.gov

dependent on the correct sequence of events occurring. The type of care needed determines what facility is available. Could Mom live at home if we had a nurse visiting her every day? Could we afford it? Or, would she require specialized treatment on a daily basis, such as a physical therapist? The needs assessment prompted me with many such questions and was a very useful tool. Finally, since the site is powered by NW Technologies, a Wisconsin firm specializing in geographic search tool development, advertisements were non-existent — except for the site itself.

The Retirement Net (www.retirenet.com) focuses more on active retirees

newsletter which can be found at www.galaxymail.com/shops/nursing_homes.html. It's pretty lightweight; I'm sure she wants you to subscribe to her newsletter before you get any real content.

Another questionnaire was also quite useful for nursing home hunters. Go to www.members.tripod.com/~volfangery/index.html. The checklist they provide is excellent to use when touring a nursing home and then comparing it with other homes visited.

Nursing homes can be scary propositions for many people. Nursing homes can and do close for reasons we do not like to think about — inadequate care, inadequate financing, or

Metasearching

Running one more search, I used a metasearch tool that uses six different search engines simultaneously that you can find at www.search.metafind.com. I sent it off to look up nursing home care and long-term care. While I ran into some of the same sites that I found using AOL Netfind and AltaVista, there was more. Useful for its down-to-earth explanation of what is and is not covered by Medicare is the site at www.healthguide.com/livingoptions/NurseHome.htm.

There is no question that there is a wealth of nursing homes and elder care information available on the Internet. I've given you just a few ideas of where to go and what to find. Of course, using the Internet is just the first step to helping a loved one move to a long-term care facility. Discussing the matter with your loved one and visiting facilities is also extremely important. But, at least you can ask some of the right questions after you've done your initial Web search.

Happy hunting!

Emily Sopensky is an Austin-based freelance writer. Her mother has recovered nicely and is now residing in a long-term care facility in Virginia.