

David Borrowman of Solicitors for Older People Scotland – comments on care issues.

It need not always be a care home

Families face a difficult and emotional time when an older person, maybe mum or dad, begins to decline. Loss of physical and mental faculties can be upsetting to observe and these declining faculties usually mean the older person needs care or will need care in the foreseeable future. Sometimes families can manage on their own - sometimes not. Not all families realise everyone is entitled to a care needs assessment from the local authority and lots of help can be made available after assessment of the relevant family member's care needs.

The outcome of these assessments vary of course with the level of care needed but often families too readily think that residential care is the first option. Indeed family members may feel under pressure to provide care personally - and that might be difficult or impossible for them to achieve without disruption to their jobs and family life. These considerations might make residential care seem an attractive "family" choice and maybe even a first choice when perhaps more thought and investigation might produce other alternatives.

Going into a residential home can sometimes be terribly difficult and upsetting for an older person in Scotland. There are distinct advantages for all if care at home can be organised. The "least disruption the better" especially for an older person in their familiar and much loved home is a commonsense rule that everyone can understand. The individual receiving the care at home may feel a sense of continuing independence which does wonders for their self esteem. Couples can remain together longer – this is really important. The separation caused by one going in to a home may often hurt both quite badly - irrespective of whether one party has diminishing faculties. A very simple thing like staying in the same house as a pet of many years can be very important to an older person. The ability of family members to visit regularly and informally is often much easier at home than perhaps travelling to a residential establishment.

On the financial side sometimes it can be more economical for care to be provided at home – especially if both members of a couple need some care. Families should be aware also that the "care at home" part of the industry has developed significantly over the last few years. Now there are a number of companies which provide care services in the home which go well beyond what perhaps might be considered to be basic personal care services such as help with bathing, dressing, medication reminders etc. A whole range of services from complex nursing help, through "home help" duties to companionship and social help can all now be accessed from reputable companies. Indeed where companionship and home help is provided often firm friendships develop between the carer and the cared for which enhance the older person's life.

My advice to families is to think ahead. Anticipate that there will possibly be care requirements arising for older family members sometime in the future. Discuss what people might want and what is going to be best for everyone – but we aware that good care in the home is now readily available. Then do some research – look at all the care at home options available – the internet is a great tool for this. There is also lots of help available from social work departments and charities such as Age Scotland or Independent Age. Once families know what is available a plan or preferred option will emerge. Getting the right care for a family member is like most things in life – the more preparation you do the more likely you are to achieve a successful outcome.