

Sexuality in care centers is a real issue

DI Findley, executive director, Iowa CareGivers, West Des Moines, Letter to the Editor 11:10 p.m. CDT August 22, 2014



(Photo: Iowa Legislature, Iowa Legislature)

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The Aug. 15 article "Lawmaker Faces Sexual Abuse Charges" sheds light, once again, on the issue of human sexuality in care settings.

As a former nurse aide and in my 22-year role as the director of Iowa CareGivers working with and advocating on behalf of many direct care workers, I know that sex and sexuality in care settings are very real. There are many variables in these cases, which is probably why abuse laws and the definition of abuse are debated frequently by lawmakers, advocates and others.

There are questions about cognitive abilities. And sometimes those with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias exhibit inappropriate or uninhibited sexual behaviors as part of the disease process.

There is the question of why, if couples are married and have been sexually active as an expression of their love for each other, they should be denied that right when one or both move to a nursing facility or other institutional care setting. But the key issue here, impaired or not, is that of consent.

There is also the issue of openly gay couples residing in nursing facilities or retirement housing, and some have expressed concerns about their being discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. What are the ethical issues that health care workers face in these instances?

In some cases, certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and others who work in direct care assist aging or disabled Iowans and their partners with expressing their sexuality. For example, I've heard them talking about their roles assisting an individual who is perfectly capable of making a decision to have sex, but the person cannot move his or her body to get in position for sex. When we've discussed the issue with workers, some feel comfortable with it and others do not. And what kind of training do they receive or need to receive in this area?

And what about the CNAs and other staff who are sometimes sexually harassed or groped by residents who may or may not be cognitively impaired? What are the staff's rights and what recourse do they have, legal or otherwise?

These are tough issues and pretending that they don't exist or that older Iowans and individuals with disabilities don't have or shouldn't have sex is absurd. Blinders stand in the way of an open and civil dialogue about these controversial but important issues.

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