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Report questions psych drug use at Heritage Hall

Watchdog group claims drugs given
to keep patients subdued, costs down

By Ben Carlson
News staff

A watchdog group claims that a local nursing home is administering antipsychotic drugs to residents without a psychosis or related condition in an effort to keep staffing costs down.

Kentuckians for Nursing Home Reform cites a nationwide study by the federal government that reveals nearly 1-in-5 residents at Heritage Hall without psychosis or related condition received antipsychotic drugs.

The study was conducted by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and released by last month by The Boston Globe.

"It's a growing problem in nursing homes that would choose to administer knock-out pills rather than hire sufficient staff to take care of these residents, mostly victims of dementia or Alzheimer's disease," said Bernie Vonderheide, a spokesperson for Kentuckians for Nursing Home Reform, located in Lexington.

"Those persons slumped over and sound asleep in their wheelchairs at your local nursing homes often times just don't happen. They can be victims of the

misuse of antipsychotics."

Jim Alexander, a spokesperson for Elmcroft Senior Living and Memory Care in Louisville, which operates Heritage Hall, said the data don't take into account why physicians sometimes prescribe the drugs.

"There are valid reasons why a physician may choose to prescribe a medication such as anti-psychotics without a diagnosis of psychosis or related condition such as controlling a patient's anxiety over a specific disease process," said Alexander. "The statistics quoted do not take into account this very important decision process made by the patient's personal physician."

"We do take our responsibility very seriously as it pertains to the care and comfort of our patients,"

"All medications including anti-psychotics administered to any patient of one of our skilled and rehabilitation centers is always prescribed by their personal attending physician.

"We constantly work with our nursing staffs, the patient's physician and our pharmacists regarding the type and

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use of medications administered."

According to the federal study, the median use of antipsychotic drugs in nursing homes across the country is 16.7 percent. Data show of the 89 residents at Heritage Hall at the time of the study, 19.8 percent received the drugs despite being without a

psychosis or related condition.

Across Kentucky, 161 of 280 nursing homes were over the median number, according to the study.

The drugs, which are supposed to be administered by prescription, are ordered by doctors at nursing homes but administered "off label," Vonderheide said.

"They get a supply

of the drugs through a pharmacy and are supposed to be used

according to label directions," he said. "What is suspected is that many nursing homes use them off label because they know the drug will put Mrs. Jones to sleep for four or five hours.

"The label didn't say to use them to quiet people down or make them sleep."

He added that dementia patients are often disturbed or can become violent and require adequate staffing to control them.

"It's expensive to hire more caregivers," he said. "That is the single biggest problem in nursing homes — the lack of caregivers — and this illustrates that further."

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has announced that it will attempt to have states crack down on misuse and reduce by

15 percent the number of who don't need the drugs but are receiving them, according to a news release from watchdog group.

Vonderheide said that's not nearly good enough.

"A committee has been formed in Kentucky and will meet next week," Vonderheide said. "The committee membership is heavy on industry lobbyists and nursing home representatives and state bureaucrats. Only two or three persons on a conference call by CMS were consumer reps, among them a representative of Kentuckians for Nursing Home Reform.

"It's like the fox guarding the hen house. But we will be watching them, and believe me, they need watching."

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