

TESTIMONY OF SHEILA E. ALBORES

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U.S. SENATE, COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
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I would like to start by thanking Senator Grassley and the members of the Finance Committee for the opportunity to share my family's experience with a nursing home and the quality of care provided to my mother.

On April 9, 2001, my mother, Ana Carrasco, went into a hospital ER due to several reasons. My mother Ana was 57 years old and went into the hospital because she was having difficulty breathing. Her condition was critical and guarded. She was admitted to the intensive care unit and was placed on a ventilator. She needed a tracheotomy tube placed for breathing. Her condition gradually improved and she was able to breathe on her own. She had head and neck cancer that was treated with chemotherapy and radiation just 2 years before. Tests were done and my family received the best possible news. No cancer! Her voice box was damaged from the anti-cancer treatments, but the doctors could do something in the future. My mother first needed to regain her strength and a course of short-term rehabilitation was recommended.

The social worker from the hospital spoke to me and my family and recommended, along with attending physicians at the hospital, that my mother be placed in a short-term facility for instructions on how to change and clean her tracheotomy. The social worker recommended a few facilities nearby. We chose the closest to my home. The social worker made the arrangements with the director of the facility for my mother's transfer with tracheotomy care instructions.

On Thursday, April 26, 2001, my mother was released at approximately 1:30 p.m. from the hospital en route to the rehabilitation/nursing home. She was transferred to the nursing home after spending 25 days in the hospital. She arrived at approximately 2:00 p.m. Her treatment plan included physical therapy and she was to then go to my home with services. That same day, my husband and I were moving my mother's belongings from her home to my home, for she would be staying with us temporarily. My husband and I arrived at the nursing home approximately at 8:00 pm after we were finished with the move.

My mother, Ana was admitted to Room 104a. When we arrived, I observed my mom was just lying in a bed and no oxygen was hooked up, which was supposed to have been taken care of. She had a G-tube and was supposed to be receiving supplemental feedings through her G-tube. Nothing had been taken care of. She was just lying there. My mother told me she had been placed in the room by the ambulance technicians, and nothing further had been done for her since her arrival six hours prior. She was visibly upset and pleaded with me to take her out of the facility. She told me she thought she was going to a facility for rehabilitation, and now she was placed in a room with an

elderly patient with many needs that were unmet. A poor elderly woman in my mother's room had bedsores all over her side.

My mother Ana was visibly nervous because she had just arrived from a hospital where she had made such an improvement in her health and didn't want to worsen her condition. I summoned the head nurse on duty, and had asked for her assistance several times before she finally came. I expressed my outrage and concern for my mother's care. My husband, my four-year-old daughter and I were there until 11:00 p.m. Instructing the nurse on everything my mother needed. All my mother's instructions were written and sent over with her, so the nurse should have known what was needed for her care. However, the nurse on duty said she had started her shift after my mother arrived and assumed my mother's needs had been met by the previous nurse. However, nothing had been done. Finally, when I had gotten my mother, Ana, semi-comfortable, I called my sister in California because it was her birthday and my mother wanted to speak with her.

I explained my mother's needs and her medication requirements to the staff. I was assured by the head nurse that she and the staff would take care of my mother's needs and that I should take my complaints up with the Director of the facility the next day when she was at work.

The following morning, I arrived at approximately 8:30 a.m. And was told by the receptionist to take a seat because the Director was in a meeting and would see me when she was done. Shortly after, I was summoned into the Director's office. The social worker of the facility was also there. They were discussing my mother's needs and the problems during her admittance.

I told them that I was outraged at the care given to my mother and wanted her released immediately. I had been given a list of other facilities in the area and wanted to have my mother transferred. Since I was already working on having my mother moved to my home with in-home nurses and other necessary help, the Director assured me that this was not an everyday occurrence and that moving her to another facility would just traumatize and upset my mother even more. I expressed my mother's fears of being placed in a home and again both the Director and the social worker assured me that extra care was going to be taken with the handling of my mother.

They assured me they were going to summon the resident physician for a complete evaluation. Her therapy would start immediately, and they asked me to please give them a week to work with her and her therapy. I responded, "Today is Friday. I am going to call a home health agency my mother is already using and ask them to have my home set up with the necessary equipment to care for my mother at home. You have the weekend for me to see any type of improvement. If by then, my mother, Ana and I are not satisfied with the care and therapy she should be receiving, I want a referral made for her immediate release to my home."

The social worker seemed compassionate and accompanied me to speak with my mother and try to calm her. She also took all the information for the home health agency for

future transfer. We went to see my mother and the social worker apologized for the previous night and told her that her care would be handled differently from that point on.

I came back later that afternoon. My mother's medication was supposed to have been given at approximately 4:00 p.m. She still had not received her medication and again I complained to the nurse who told me she was very busy and had not had a chance to get to her. I stayed until she received her medication and was comfortable.

On Friday, April 27, 2001 I spoke to the attending physician. I explained to him the account of my mother's first day, the meeting with the director, social worker, and head nurse. Even after all those discussions and meetings, my mother's care had not improved. Nothing had changed. He said he understood, spoke to my mother, put in orders for her medications and said therapy was not to start on the weekend, but because all that had happened, she would receive therapy Saturday and Sunday. He had no explanation as to the lack of proper care for my mother at that point.

On Saturday, April 28, 2001, when I arrived, my mother was complaining that she was warm and perspiring. She requested that her room be a little cooler. They said it could not be. I noticed the thermostat on the wall and turned it down myself. My mother also asked if she could be bathed since she had not received a bath since her arrival on Thursday. We were informed that they were short staffed and she would be put on a bath schedule and she wasn't due for one yet. My mother then asked if she could have some cold wet rags so I could wipe her down. I was told she couldn't have those. So I took some small washcloths I found on a cart sitting in the hallway and did it myself. I did that along with some other grooming my mother had asked for. She also complained of severe nausea. I asked that she be given Prevacid, a medication to help control nausea, which was also on her chart. Without this medication she could become very ill and vomit. I strongly urged the nurse's staff to please get that medication to her because considering she had a tracheotomy, vomiting was not an option for her. They assured me they would contact the attending physician and get it to her. In the meantime, they felt the over the counter medication Pepcid would do the same for her. The nurse told me to leave and they would take care of the situation. I only did so because my uncle was coming to visit my mother.

When my uncle arrived, he also observed that my mother Ana was in a state of panic. She again complained of nausea and excessive heat. She told him that I had requested that she be given a medication to help combat the nausea and still had not received anything. Her room was also very warm. He left and went to the closet store and brought her back and portable fan and Chapstick because her lips were extremely dry and chapped. As he left the facility, he called me from his cell phone to tell me how mortified he was with the condition of her care. He also stated that he was there for over an hour and no one had come by to check on her. I called the facility around 8:45 p.m. and asked to speak to my mother and was told I could not because she had vomited. They told me they had given her Pepcid and that she was doing much better. I waited about a half an hour and called again to speak to my mother, Ana Carrasco. I was paying for her to have a phone in her room but the phone never worked. Whenever I

would call to speak with her, the staff would have to find another phone and bring in it to her. My mother at this point was so upset because she had vomited and was concerned about the tracheotomy. She was very nervous and was very warm. I tried to calm her down and said I would be there first thing in the morning. Again, she confirmed they did not give her the medication that was requested and prescribed Prevocid.

When I arrived on Sunday afternoon, my mother, Ana seemed extremely agitated and again was very warm to the touch. Her room again was very warm. Once again, I asked that the temperature in her room be made cooler. When it was not, I myself turned the thermometer down. My mother again asked me to get some cool washcloths to cool her down because she again was not given a bath. She also had not received therapy that day. In addition, she complained of not being able to breathe well. She begged me to take her out of the facility; she did not want to spend another moment there. I told her first thing in the morning I would speak to the social worker of the facility to prepare the transfer papers. Again I noticed her medication had not been given to her on schedule and pleaded with the nurses and staff to assist her and try to make her comfortable. I also told them she was extremely nervous and had been for the last couple of days. She had a prescription to help her with panic/anxiety attacks. For an hour the nurse and I went back and forth trying to get this medication for her. While this was going on, my husband was sitting next to the nurse's station and overheard the head nurse say "I don't need this bullshit. I am a registered nurse and shouldn't have to deal with these patients' relatives." She had no idea my husband overheard her comment.

Finally, the nurse got an Ativan, crushed it and put it in a small cup of applesauce. Together we went to my mother's room. I watched as she instructed my mother to swallow the sauce with the crushed medication in it. My mother and I both told her that she never swallowed her meds but they were always administered through her G-tube. The nurse said to try and swallow it because it would get absorbed into her system quicker this way. In desperation to feel better, my mother did as told.

On Monday morning I called and spoke to the social worker of the nursing home and informed her I wanted my mother transferred out of the facility immediately. I was told that my mother could not be released to me but to another facility or agency. I then gave the social worker all the information to the at-home health agency that my mother was already using, and asked that the process for transfer begin ASAP. We spoke at least five times on that Monday regarding her transfer out of the nursing home to my home with the assistance of the home health agency and about my request for necessities to help care for my mother.

I went to see my mother, Ana again that evening accompanied by my husband and my daughter. My mother seemed greatly distressed. She was clammy and she was very warm, extremely nervous; and at this point, she said she was just plain scared. I told her that this would be her last night there and that she would be leaving the nursing home tomorrow and coming to my home. I told her that I had already spoken to the home health agency and already had her hospital bed, oxygen tanks, portable commode, and other equipment to assist her arriving the next morning. She begged me to take her out at

that moment, but the equipment could not be set up until the next day. I said, “just hang in there one more night.”

The next morning I was busy speaking to the home health agency. They called to confirm our appointment for that day and that they were sending a nurse and a technician to set up oxygen and give breathing treatments to my mother. I called the nursing home to speak to my mom to let her know everything was ready for her arrival and if there was anything else she needed for her stay with me. When I called the nursing home I was first told she was not in her room. I asked where she was and was told by whomever answered the phone that she might be in therapy. I then informed this person she was not due for therapy because she was being transferred that day. I was put on hold several times until a nurse came on the phone to inform me that my mother was transferred to a nearby hospital with no further explanation. I then told the nurse she must have been mistaken and that I would be on my way to clear up any misunderstandings. The nurse told me not to come to the nursing home but that I should go to the hospital because there had been a problem with my mother. She then went on to tell me that some time early that morning she was making her rounds when she passed my mother’s room and observed she was using the commode so the nurse continued on to the next patient. A nurse’s aid summoned her back to my mother’s room and told her” your patient doesn’t look well.” That is when the nurse said she observed that my mother Ana was seizing and laid back and was unresponsive. They said they started CPR, called the doctor, then called paramedics and my mother was then taken to a nearby hospital. I never received any calls from the nursing prior to this to inform me of what happened. My mother lay in the emergency room for hours while I thought she was being prepared for her transfer. By the time I arrived at the emergency room, it was too late. I was told my mother was unresponsive.

Instead of going home, my mother died. From the time of her admission till the time she was brought to the hospital by the paramedics on May 1, 2002; the nursing home let Ana & my family down. They didn’t provide her with the treatment and services she was sent to the nursing home to receive. Ana didn’t get her medicines; she didn’t receive therapy, didn’t receive the necessary services to keep her tracheotomy tube functioning properly, she didn’t even receive a bath. This happened despite my vigilance; my constant calls, my visits to the home, my begging and pleading. It all fell on deaf ears.

Members of the Committee, I again would like to thank you for the opportunity to tell about my family’s unfortunate ordeal to help you understand the great need for better health care in nursing homes today. I conclude today’s testimony with this statement; My mother, Ana Carrasco, was fifty-seven years old, able to voice her complaints and concerns, and had the support of family by her side at the nursing home, and yet still faced a fatal end. If this could happen to my mother, I ask who is watching those patients who are not able to voice their complaints or do not have relatives for support. What does fate hold for them?