

# Warehouses for death

By Peter Birt  
for Canadian University Press

If this book is not of interest to young people, it can only be because they have not thought about their own future. **Warehouses for Death: The Nursing Home Industry** is an important book because, although people have had the information for some time, they are only now realizing that soon old people, senior citizens, will make up the majority of the population.

And this is obviously going to mean a few changes in our youth-oriented, advertising society. When in less than twenty-five years people over the age of 64 will need four times the number of hospital beds they now require, there will be forced changes in the kind of social service policy that has already closed hundreds of beds in Ontario.

The larger question is, however, the overall response of society to an era of an elderly majority. It's not a challenge to the quality of retirement, or the theatre admission discount, it's simply a matter of life and death. That's Daniel Jay Baum's point.

He says in his introduction that he used such an abrasive title for his book because he knew it was necessary to make sure his case got a real hearing. And his case, briefly summed up, is "to describe institutions, such as nursing homes, and to ask if there is not a better way to treat the elderly." He points out that Canada is one of the countries with the largest percentage of institutionalized aged citizens, and he says that this is, more often than not, an experience more negative than positive.

The case of the nursing home horror story is not new. He doesn't pretend that it is. But he tries to go on from those horror stories to some of the related questions. He talks about the inducements offered senior citizens to leave their homes and seek out places in an institution, instead of receiving services at home in some way.

This kind of all-or-nothing choice—go to a home and get access to all kinds of medical, cleaning and food services, or stay at home alone—is the kind of thing that Baum documents.

The documentation comes, of course, from a study of the bizarre and what he would

probably call 'inhuman' regulations that the various levels of government have imposed on senior citizens. Baum doesn't make the case that governments should have less of a commitment to helping senior citizens—he makes the case that this care should often be of a different kind, a more flexible kind, and simply of a more thinking kind.

The examples he uses to make these points aren't all new; rules forbidding people to take personal furniture and effects into the home, often for no valid reason, rules preventing married couples from living together, rules that don't ensure any kind of privacy or often any kind of dignity—in the end, they make a pretty bleak statement.

Baum also talks about a unique and insidious aspect of the whole nursing home, private or public system. In the chapter "Point of No Return" he says that rules in the home often make it nearly impossible for a patient ever to leave the home once he or she has entered it. Too often all of that person's financial resources will be committed to the home on entering, so even those with a little money saved may have to give it up for the time spent at the home. It may

not be prorated, or even taken gradually.

Baum's bias in all of this—if you can call it a bias—is his notion that many people don't need to be committed (a nicely descriptive and loaded word itself) because it means a loss of freedom, individuality, and enjoyment, in the narrowest sense of that word. His last question is, then, why do we not keep people out of nursing homes unless it is absolutely necessary? Fundamental as that question seems, it is not answered in the current situation.

The weakest part of his book is the chapter on public policy for health care and social services. As anyone who has been watching recent government cutbacks in this area knows, reductions have been increasing.

Baum talks about the social services funding in a narrow way, not making some of the links that would pull together what the net effects have been of social service cutbacks. On public debate over the issue he says, "The public discussion on institutionalization of the aged in Ontario then, was to become a means of government to bring the public to a conclusion which it had already reached. On the other hand the public was to know

only enough to be supportive of already determined government policy."

No attempt is made to sell this book as the definitive work on care of the aged or social service policy in this area, and rightly so. But the book does do a good job at raising some of the questions that must be addressed, even though many of us don't really want to start talking about them.

Baum talks about this problem.

"There are questions that go beyond the use of tax dollars. Why has the community chosen to isolate its aged members? What needs are satisfied by the institution of nursing homes? Why haven't home care services developed as in other nations? The questions and the answers will cause discomfort not only to the young but also to the aged. The isolation of aged is no accident. It is a conscious act. It is done because the larger community does not want to see and does not want to cope with the aged. The old do not have the face of youth. The old look upon their mortality, and their faces mirror what every human being must encounter. In our society, however, death is denied. It is not accepted as a part of life."

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