

# Isolated and Lonely in a Nursing Home During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic: A Deadly Combination for My Mom

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The call from the nursing home came on a Saturday morning in November 2020: “Your mom is at the end of life. You may now come and have an in-room visit.” I got in my car and started the 7-hour drive to her nursing home in Chicago. While driving, I reflected on my 93-year-old mom’s life and how the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had prevented me and my 3 siblings from visiting her for the previous 9 months.

My mom’s progressive macular degeneration, decreasing mobility, and mild dementia led to her moving from her home to the nursing home at age 89. Her nursing unit had 8 private rooms; she was a friend to the 7 other residents. My mom had been vibrant, talkative, and the best-dressed person at the nursing home. Her nursing aides quickly learned that she wanted them to coordinate her clothes, slippers, and weekly manicures. She made them laugh.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I talked by phone with my mom every day. I frequently made the drive to Chicago to spend time with her. I would pack up her wheelchair and take her

shopping and out to lunch. My siblings, who lived in Chicago, would visit her in person regularly. Little did I know that when I kissed her goodbye at Christmas 2019, it would be the last time I would hold her hand in person until this end-of-life visit in November 2020.

In an effort to prevent the most vulnerable elderly patients from acquiring or transmitting COVID-19, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) issued a lockdown order on 13 March 2020, banning everyone but essential personnel from entering nursing homes. My mom was kept in her private room with the door shut. Masks were mandated for employees and residents. All socialization stopped, including her weekly manicures. Group activities were prohibited; my mom ate every meal alone in her room. Her nursing aides could not use their iPhones for my calls, so I had to call her landline phone in the room. Due to her poor vision and growing confusion, she would frequently pick up the receiver backward. She could not hear me and would hang up. The few times I was able to connect with her, she would ask, “When will you come to see me? None of you visit me anymore. I sit in my room alone all day. They won’t let me see my friends. I am not allowed even to attend mass. I do not want to live like this.” I tried to explain that there was a very deadly virus and we needed to protect her. It was heartbreaking.

As the pandemic progressed into summer and fall, her nursing home implemented “window visits.” On paper, this

policy sounds reasonable to reconnect patients with their loved ones. The reality was that window visits were useless for my mom. The window visit required family to preschedule the visit. A nursing aide had to be available to bring my mom down to the window in her wheelchair. My sisters would arrive for the scheduled 15-minute visit, only to learn that the nursing home was short-staffed that day and the visit had to be canceled. When the window visit did occur, my mom would be in her wheelchair 10 feet from the window. My sisters would be outside shouting to my mom, with another family at the next window shouting to their loved one. I was on my sister’s iPhone Facetime, also shouting to my mom (Figure 1). My mom would ask her aide, “Why am I down here? I do not see anyone (she had macular degeneration), and I do not hear anyone (she was hard of hearing).” When the aide would tell her, “It is your daughters and son outside,” she would say, “Well, tell them to come in to see me!” This was not possible.

I watched as my mom’s verbal skills declined each month. She became more confused. I had an N-95 mask fit test, as did my brother (a physician in a hospital) and 1 sister (a nurse in a hospital). We pleaded with the nursing home director to allow us to visit our mom in her private room. We were safer with our N-95 masks than the aides caring for her, who wore poor-fitting surgical masks. We continued to make our case to visit our mom, but the nursing home would not make any exceptions: only

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**Figure 1.** Nursing home window visit during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.



**Figure 2.** Nursing home “end-of-life” visit with resident Eleanor Tauscher and her daughter Debbie Goff, infectious diseases pharmacist.

allowed to visit at end of life. When I received the “end-of-life” phone call and arrived at the nursing home, my siblings and I were handed inadequate KN-95 masks, gowns, and gloves. Her 4 children entered her room.

“Mom, it’s Debbie, your favorite youngest daughter!”

“Mom, it’s Barb, your favorite middle daughter!”

“Mom, it’s Diane, your favorite oldest daughter!”

“Mom, it’s Jack, your favorite son!”

Her eyes opened only to see 4 unrecognizable people standing over her in masks, gowns, and gloves. Knowing we were COVID-19–negative, we removed our masks and gloves. I held her hand. Her eyes lit up, and she asked, “Where have you been?” She squeezed my hand and never let go. We talked, we laughed, we gave her ice cream with a Starbucks latte, her favorites. After 4 days of daily visits with her 4 kids, she was back to her baseline and no longer at the “end of life.” When she asked how much longer she would need to live like this, isolated and alone, we said for several more months. She replied, “I’m blessed we had this time together.” We each told her how much we loved her, knowing it could be the last time we would see her (Figure 2). Ironically, because she had improved, the nursing home determined that she was no longer at the end of her life, so we could no longer visit!

On my drive back, I reflected on my mom’s life. She had a blessed life; however, we could not imagine her dying alone, thinking all 4 of her children had abandoned her. My mom died 2 weeks later. Her 7 other nursing unit friends also died, but none from COVID-19. From March 2020 to November 2020, they just slowly died. Families and the nursing aides felt the deaths were largely from being isolated and lonely and lacking physical contact with the ones who loved them most. I thought of all the other nursing home patients who did not die from COVID-19 but suffered and died

because of COVID-19 nursing home infection control policies. According to the CMS, 167 183 nursing home patients have died from COVID-19 [1]. We will never be able to tally the number of elderly residents who died in nursing

homes during this pandemic from loneliness or a broken heart. Death from a broken heart is real.

#### **Note**

*Potential conflicts of interest.* The author: No reported conflicts of interest. The author has

submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest.

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1. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. COVID-19 nursing home data. 2023. Available at: <https://data.cms.gov/covid-19/covid-19-nursing-home-data>. Accessed 17 July 2023.