

## Visiting Care Homes during the Coronavirus Pandemic – Hope at the end of the Tunnel?

Are you keen to see your relative or friend in a care home but told that's impossible as the home is closed lest visitors bring in coronavirus? Are you a pastoral visitor or a minister similarly thwarted, yet desperate to be in touch with individuals in a care home whom you know rely on you for spiritual and emotional support?

Take heart! Each of the four national inspection and regulation agencies for care homes – the Care Quality Commission (in England), the Care Inspectorate Scotland, the Care Inspectorate Wales and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority of Northern Ireland – has stressed to homes the importance of residents keeping in contact with their relatives and friends during the pandemic. Each organisation countenances the possibility of homes permitting visits in exceptional circumstances, mainly at the end of life but also, in the case of the Scottish government, “people with dementia who are distressed”. The RQIA is more relaxed still, advising only a general restriction on visits: certainly not any kind of blanket ban. Nonetheless, the threat of coronavirus infection to homes is so great that the overwhelming majority of the indoor, face-to-face visits which residents would previously have enjoyed with their family and friends and other valued contacts are being ruled out by homes, and this looks likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

To mitigate the mental anguish restrictions on visiting would be likely to cause, the Care Quality Commission, for example, says homes in England “*must* support people to maintain connectivity with their friends and families” (my emphasis), and that residents should be told how they can maintain contact with friends and relatives in the absence of face-to-face visits.

All four regulators helpfully put forward alternative means of maintaining contact which homes should consider. “Regular telephone calls with family and friends should be encouraged and consideration could be given to visual mechanisms such as video calls e.g. Skype or FaceTime”, advises the Care Inspectorate Wales. The CQC says alternatives which homes should consider include, but are not limited, to:

- keeping in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media phone calls
- video calling, and
- supporting people to see their relatives outdoors, in the home's grounds or a local open space, while maintaining the two-metres distancing rule.

**Residents at Drovers House care home in Rugby keeping in touch with their relatives during the coronavirus pandemic**



We are fortunate that recent technological advances have provided a range of sophisticated audio and video apps to facilitate communication; the Care Inspectorate Scotland has published a useful guide to the free apps available.

However, contact through video-calling requires equipment such as tablets, and many care homes have few such gadgets. If shortage of equipment is a problem in your local care homes, perhaps your church or local community could offer to donate unwanted equipment, suitably disinfected?

Contact through mobile phone has many advantages, not least mobility – for example, mobiles could be used by a resident and their friend talking through a window, so they can see and wave to each other. Two care homes in Maidstone have accepted the request of Anna Chaplain Elizabeth Bryson for telephone contact. Just before Palm Sunday she told me, “In one home the activities coordinator took the phone to four

residents in their own rooms. It was really special: I sang over the phone, I prayed with them, I recited scripture. That was a way of giving them spiritual care without seeing them.”

Contact through remote technology won't suit everybody, however, particularly people who find mobiles difficult to use because of problems with dexterity or eyesight, while people with dementia may find a screen puzzling and disturbing. Seeing someone in the flesh could be far more reassuring, so the CQC's third suggestion of meeting outdoors would probably suit them better. Ideally, a member of staff would wheel or walk a resident to a secluded spot where they would be able to enjoy not only the company of their loved one, but also the sights and sounds of spring. The CQC is the only regulator which suggests outdoor meetings, but there is no reason why relatives should not propose it in other parts of the UK.

However, we live in extremely worrying times for care homes. The risk of infection means any contact with visitors should be very carefully risk-assessed: if, for example, a resident would have to pass through an area in which they might be exposed to infection to reach the outdoors, steps would need to be taken to remove that risk or, if completely impossible, other means of contact devised. There is also the pressure on staff time to consider at a time of staff shortages and demands arising from the virus. Clearly, relatives and friends should be prepared to be flexible.

Nonetheless, this is an important area – care home residents may feel dismayed at being cut off from their loved ones and about whom they may be very worried, while those unable to comprehend the reason for the change in their lives may despair that their families have abandoned them. I am trying to compile information about what is happening on the ground, especially the extent to which homes are encouraging alternatives to face-to-face visits indoors and how this is working. Could you send any reports or thoughts to me at [marion@marionshoard.co.uk](mailto:marion@marionshoard.co.uk) or P O Box 664, Rochester, ME1 9JB, please? With your permission, I shall mention them in future updates on this subject on the Christians on Ageing website. Thank you.

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