

## COVID-19 pandemic

# ‘Protected them to death’: Elder-care rules under fire

BY MICHAEL RUBINKAM

Associated Press

Barbara and Christine Colucci long to remove their masks and kiss their 102-year-old mother, who has dementia and is in a nursing home in Rochester, New York. They would love to have more than two people in her room at a time so that relatives can be there, too.

“We don’t know how much longer she’s going to be alive,” Christine Colucci said, “so it’s like, please, give us this last chance with her in her final months on this earth to have that interaction.”

Pandemic restrictions are falling away almost everywhere — except inside many of America’s nursing homes. Rules designed to protect the nation’s most vulnerable from COVID-19 are still being enforced even though 75% of nursing home residents are now vaccinated and infections and deaths have plummeted.

Frustration has set in as families around the country visit their moms and, this Father’s Day weekend, their dads. Hugs and kisses are still discouraged or banned in some nursing homes. Residents are dining in relative isolation and playing bingo and doing crafts at a distance. Visits are limited and must be kept short, and are cut off entirely if someone tests positive for the coronavirus.

Family members and advocates question the need for such restrictions at this stage of the pandemic, when the risk is comparatively low. They say the measures are now just prolonging older people’s isolation and accelerating their mental and physical decline.

“They have protected them to death,” said Denise Gracle, whose 80-year-old mother, Marian Rauenzahn, lives in a nursing home in Topton, Pennsylvania.

Rauenzahn had COVID-19 and then lost part of a leg to gangrene, but Gracle said what she struggled with the most was enforced solitude, going from six-day-a-week visits to none at all.

Rauenzahn’s daughters eventually won the right to see her once a week, and the nursing home now says it plans to relax the rules on visits for all residents in late June. But it has not been enough, as far as Gracle is concerned.

“I believe it’s progressed her dementia,” Gracle said. “She’s very lonely. She wants out of there so bad.”

Pennsylvania’s long-term care ombudsman has received hun-



Matt Slocum/AP

Angela Ermold, right, and her sister, Denise Gracle, hold a photo of their mother, Marian Rauenzahn, on June 17 in Fleetwood, Pennsylvania. Pandemic restrictions are falling away almost everywhere — except inside many of America’s nursing homes. “They have protected them to death,” said Gracle.

reds of complaints about visiting rules this year. Kim Shetler, a data specialist in the ombudsman’s office, said some nursing homes’ COVID-19 restrictions go beyond what state and federal guidelines require. Administrators have been doing what they feel is necessary to keep people safe, she said, but families are understandably upset.

“We’ve done our darndest to advocate for folks to get those visitation rights,” she said. “It’s their home. They should have that right to come and go and have the visitors that they choose.”

A recent survey by National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care, an advocacy group, found time limits on visits remain commonplace, ranging from 15 minutes to two hours.

Rauenzahn’s Pennsylvania nursing home has been limiting most residents to a single, 30-minute visit every two weeks. Federal authorities should “restore full visitation rights to nursing home residents without delay,” Consumer Voice and several other advocacy groups said in a June 11 letter to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Residents are “continuing

to suffer from isolation and decline because of the limited visitation permitted in the current guidance,” the letter said.

Advocates also take issue with federal guidance on how nursing homes deal with new COVID-19 cases. The guidance says most visits should be suspended for at least 14 days. Some family members, administrators and advocates complain that the recommendation has led to frequent lockdowns because of one or two cases.

“We’ve never had a real long, lengthy period of time where we’re able to have visitors,” said Jason Santiago, chief operating officer at The Manor at Seneca Hill in Oswego, New York. He said continued isolation is inflicting a heavy toll. “We’ve got to do things that make more sense for these residents, make more sense for these families.”

While the federal government recently eased restrictions for vaccinated nursing home residents, New York state has not gone along. Those who eat together in communal spaces must remain socially distanced, for example, and they have to be masked and 6 feet apart during activities, no matter their vaccination status.

That makes crafts, bingo, music — “a lot of what nursing home life is about” — more difficult, said Elizabeth Weingast, vice president for clinical excellence at The New Jewish Home, which runs elder-care facilities in and around New York City.

“We prioritized vaccinating nursing home residents and that’s wonderful, but they’re not getting the same liberties that you or I have now,” said Weingast, who recently published an opinion piece calling for a loosening of restrictions.

Her co-author, Karen Lipson of LeadingAge New York, which represents nonprofit nursing homes, said the rules “force this kind of policing of love that is really, really challenging.”

With the virus infecting more than 650,000 long-term-care residents and killing more than 130,000 across the U.S., nursing homes had a duty to take precautions when COVID-19 was out of control, said Nancy Kass, a public health expert at Johns Hopkins University. But she said she is baffled by the continued heavy emphasis on safety at the expense of residents’ quality of life, given “we’re not in that state of affairs anymore.”



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Dr. Greg Jones, dentist for Fourth Street Dental in Hermiston, speaks with a patient June 10 before an exam. Jones said he has seen appointments rebound after dropping off in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Patients put off preventative care during pandemic

BY JADE MCDOWELL

East Oregonian

HERMISTON — As newly vaccinated patients are resuming their normal preventative health care, some are finding those appointments they skipped during the pandemic have consequences.

Dr. Greg Jones, dentist for Fourth Street Dental in Hermiston, said he is seeing some patients for the first time in a long time.

“You could tell people had put stuff off,” he said. “Cavities were a little bigger, cleanings had been skipped, some broken teeth could have been fixed sooner.”

He also saw signs that people had been under additional stress, including an increase in cracked teeth, jaw pain and other side effects of people grinding or clenching their teeth.

Jones said dentists in big cities where people are more cautious about COVID-19 still are seeing lower patient volumes, but in rural areas, appointments mostly have rebounded after dropping off in 2020. He said it wasn’t uncommon last year for people to cancel an appointment at the last minute because they had been asked by the health department to quarantine, while other people decided they weren’t comfortable with the risk of going in to the office.

“It was a little like a snow day, where some people don’t leave their homes and other people drive around like it’s no big deal,” he said.

In Oregon, health care providers were directed to only provide emergency services during the spring of 2020, to help preserve personal protective equipment that was in extremely short supply.

In a weekly survey of 13,000 dentists nationwide by the American Dental Association, 76% of dentists said their office was only open for emergency patients and 18% said they were closed completely on March 23, 2020. Those numbers slowly shrunk over the year, and by December, 39% described their practice as operating normally and 60% said they were open but seeing fewer patients than usual.

Jones said dentists already practiced many of the guidelines for preventing COVID-19 transmission even before the pandemic, including instrument sterilization and wearing gloves and masks while working on patients. But they have also added new precautions, including more frequent sanitization of the waiting room area and temperature checks when patients arrive.

### Cancer screenings

One of the times delaying preventative care can have the most serious consequences is when cancer is involved.

Dr. Nattamol Hosiriluck, a hematologist with Tri-Cities Cancer Center, which has offices in Hermiston, said she has seen a few cases of people whose cancer is more advanced after delaying a

routine screening, such as a mammogram, because they were trying to avoid catching COVID-19.

“Right now, the queue is really long to get a colonoscopy, so if you delayed a colonoscopy I would say book it down because it could be a few months from now,” she said.

Some cancers grow faster than others, she said, but in certain cases, not catching something for an extra six months could be fatal.

Hosiriluck said while cancer patients are in treatment, they have a higher risk of severe cases of COVID-19, so she strongly encourages patients to get vaccinated before treatment.

“If they’re not willing to get the shot, I recommend careful social distancing, because they’re more at risk,” she said.

### Eye exams

Some patients put off eye care during the pandemic.

Dr. Michelle Monkman, an optometrist with Vision Pendleton, said they were shut down for five weeks in spring of 2020, then opened to lower patient volumes. Things have been rebounding, however, as people who have gotten vaccinated have felt more comfortable coming in.

Monkman said she hadn’t personally seen anyone lose vision because they hadn’t caught something soon enough after skipping appointments during the pandemic.

If people are wondering whether to book an eye appointment, Monkman said, “I think it’s time.”



**Ways you can support Thelma's Place:**

- Vehicle donations
- Cash donations
- Sponsorships
- Volunteer

**Your support makes a difference!**

Redmond: 541-548-3049  
Day Respite and Support Groups  
[www.thelmasplace.org](http://www.thelmasplace.org)






HAPPY FATHER'S DAY

Let me help you feel better! I have been making CBD Formulas since 1961.

**SALVES - BUTTER - TINCTURES - ENTERIC CAPSULES - SLEEP CAPSULES - SUPPOSITORIES & MASSAGE OILS**

My combination of Organic Herbs & Full Spectrum CBD with Essential Oils, make my unique Formulas extremely effective. Our CBD is protected from degrading with our UV Biophotonic glass.

**Full Throttle Salve**  
1,330mg CBD  
Regular \$59.98     **Sale \$39.98**

**Premier 15 Tincture**  
1,960mg CBD  
Regular \$139.98     **Sale \$99.98**

541 389-2228     Call for \$1.98 shipping

Sherray.com & Ladybughemp.com

727 NE Greenwood Ave., Bend, OR 97701  
(Next to Planet Fitness)

## CHANGE THE WORLD With a Gift for the Future

Take your charitable giving to the next level.

Passionate and forward-thinking visionaries like you help us continue OHSU’s tradition of health care excellence. Transform human health – and change the world – with a planned gift to OHSU. Whether it’s a scholarship, annuity, endowment, IRA charitable gift, or other ideas, we’ll work with you to make a difference.

Call us or visit us online. Learn how you can reach important financial goals while building a better tomorrow.

OFFICE OF GIFT PLANNING

503-228-1730

[giftplanning.ohsufoundation.org](http://giftplanning.ohsufoundation.org)

Oregon Health  
& Science University  
**FOUNDATION**

