

ONE DAUGHTER'S STORY

USE OF SAFETY DEVICES In Montana's Assisted Living Facilities¹

My mother is 88 years old. She is confused and unsteady on her feet. After falling several times at home, she moved to an assisted living facility. The facility we chose has a good reputation. I was comfortable the staff would keep Mom safe and help her continue to walk.

Then it happened. I got a call from the facility saying they sent Mom to the emergency room. She had tripped over another resident's walker and fell flat on her face. She had a bad cut on her forehead and her knee was badly bruised. I cried when I saw her. She returned to the facility in a wheelchair with a lap tray. I felt a lot better believing the chair and tray would protect her from further falls.

Mom didn't like the chair. She kept pleading with staff to "let me out of this chair." You can imagine my concern when the staff said they wanted to use a buckle belt. I couldn't believe it. What were they thinking? Mom was still complaining about the chair, but I wasn't sure she knew what was best for her. I talked regularly with the staff. I knew their plan was to gradually remove the buckle belt on Mom's wheelchair so she could get up and walk again. I was so scared.

Mom's forehead and knee healed. The staff said they wanted to try some periods of time without the buckle belt and for her to try walking again. I agreed but was very worried about Mom getting out of the wheelchair and falling again. I called the state's long-term care specialist (ombudsman) for advice. To my dismay, the ombudsman agreed with the staff that there was no medical condition to continue using the buckle belt. Mom's clear dislike of the buckle belt and her attempts to escape indicated that we should try something less restrictive. After talking to her doctor, the buckle belt was reduced to a Velcro belt that Mom could release. Since the belt could no longer keep her in the wheelchair, she walked all over the place.

I realize now that if we continued to keep Mom in the wheelchair she probably would not be walking today. She is still restless and confused at times, but far less than when she was buckled in the wheelchair. I still worry about her safety, but I am thrilled every time I see her walking. I am happy that the staff at the assisted living facility worked with me to show me the possibilities for Mom. I know Mom's freedom and independence are still important to her, just as mine are to me.

¹ Adapted from the Minnesota Department of Health, "Safety Without Restraints: A New Practice Standard for Safe Care"