

# The Mission Continues

## Evolving Profession Faces Long Road Ahead

**I**t literally seems like yesterday that I accepted the challenge of leading the most important health care association in America. I feel privileged to have had a front-row seat these past five years as the long term care profession has continued to evolve into the quality-driven, excellence-committed model it is today.

do to improve the health of America's frail, elderly, and disabled. Our profession has demonstrated this time and time again, most recently through our partnership with the federal government on the Nursing Home Quality Initiative and through the voluntary Quality First program. National data show that our work is paying off! As

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While we have always known that what we do as long term caregivers is important work, I believe how we have changed the way we think about ourselves is even more significant. We're professionals! And more and more we are thinking like and acting like and being respected as professionals, holding our heads high and being proud of

we continue to transform the way we provide care—the way we think about long term care and the needs of our patients—quality will continue to improve.

But there is more we can do. Those individuals concerned with the health of our aging population—the demographic explosion that is

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what we do. Together, we have demonstrated that long term care is about maintaining maximum health and wellness levels for those who can't do it on their own. Although our profession still fights the notions that nursing homes are unappealing, assisted living facilities don't deliver what they promise, and intermediate care facilities for people with mental retardation are impersonal and sterile, the efforts of millions of dedicated and committed professionals have made it increasingly clear that long term caregivers of the 21st century are a new breed.

about to hit might be the only sure thing in health policy today—must join forces creatively in ways that have yet to be seen. Already, long term care providers have forged new relationships with labor unions, consumer

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groups, AARP, and others. Even within the skilled nursing and assisted living nuclear families, the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living have begun



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working more closely with the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, the American Seniors Housing Association, and the Assisted Living Federation of America. Driven by a single common interest—improving the quality of long term care in America—these groups have focused on what they have in common, not their differences, and made groundbreaking strides to ensure that our parents and grandparents, and other loved ones and friends, live the healthiest and most fulfilling lifestyle possible for as long as they can.

It is time that the long term care community started to leverage this well

of dedication and commitment more powerfully. Barriers must be broken; new partnerships must be forged. With the health and livelihood of our frail, elderly, and disabled at stake, there is

room for only one agenda. Providers throughout the continuum of long term care—nursing home operators, senior housing providers, home health aides, nurse assistants, assisted living providers, medical directors, and rehabilitation therapists, to name just a few—must coalesce behind one mis-

sion: to provide quality long term care services in the most appropriate, least restrictive, and most satisfying and economical setting possible.

The lack of a national strategy for long term care has in part resulted from and in the various factions fighting for the same pot of money, because

that's the way the system is set up. Every year in Washington long term care providers compete for the same limited resources. Ultimately the patients pay the price. We're told how much money is available and "do your best with it."

This simply must change. And since policymakers show no sign of devising a plan any time soon to create a more uniform, effective long term care system, the onus is on us, the professionals, to continue this drumbeat and emphasize that quality care costs what it costs, and we must be willing to pay the costs if we expect to get the quality care we all want.

As I envision the future of long term care, the work we do, and the potential for evolving partnerships, I'm reminded of something Sir Winston Churchill said: "Every day you make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb."

How true it is that our work is far from over. We know our patients deserve our never-ending quest to improve long term care, and that's why we each have embarked on this mission. I, for one, plan to stay in the fight for our frail, elderly, and disabled.

As I watched the recent dedication of the World War II Memorial through many tears of appreciation for what the greatest generation has given our nation, I was struck by the anomalous concept that our leaders would memorialize these individuals in granite but have not yet seen the obligation—as a matter of national policy—to celebrate them by having programs that support them in life.

I have great hopes and dreams for AHCA and NCAL, and I know that you will give our new leadership the same support you gave me. Thank you for the honor of leading during these critical times. Godspeed. ■