

Elder abuse task force reacts to nursing home scabies outbreaks



Members of the Cobb Elder Abuse Task Force met May 7 to discuss how to make sure the right people have the right information when contagious illnesses like scabies occur at senior homes.

The meeting came as one Georgia case has been making headlines nationwide. It was recently reported 93-year-old Rebecca Zeni, a resident of a senior home in Walker County, died in 2015 following a particularly grisly scabies infection. In Zeni's case, the infection appeared to have gone on for months or

years, according to news reports, with a forensic pathologist reporting millions of the microscopic mites inside her body, leading the family to sue the nursing home for neglect.

At least one case of scabies has been reported in a Cobb County assisted living home in recent months, according to the Georgia Department of Public Health and a family member of the woman who was diagnosed with the condition.

State Rep. Sharon Cooper, R-east Cobb, chairs the House Health and Human Services Committee and works with the task force. She said the senior task force is not looking to point fin-gers, but to find a way to quickly curtail future outbreaks.

"We're trying to solve a problem and prevent future problems of the same kind," she said.

The MDJ spoke with a Smyrna woman who said her mother, a 78-year-old dementia patient, lived at Elmcroft of Milford Chase in southwest Cobb for three years and contracted the para-sites about six months before her recent diagnosis.

A representative of Elmcroft of Milford Chase declined to answer questions by phone and the home did not respond to an email asking for comment.

The daughter, who did not want to be identified to protect her mother's privacy, said the home realized there was a problem quickly, but the doctors there and an outside dermatologist failed to diagnose the communicable disease over a period of months.

"In the beginning, it was a rash," the daughter said. "It was obvious to the nurses and the doctors. They prescribed her some creams to help her with the itching because she scratched a lot, and it got better. But then in February, she had a big, big breakout again and that's when the nurse and the facility said you probably want to take your mom to a dermatologist."

Scabies is caused by microscopic mites that burrow into the skin and lay eggs. It can be spread by prolonged skin-to-skin contact and often manifests as an intensely itchy rash.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nursing homes, extended-care facilities, child care centers and prisons are often the sites of scabies outbreaks because they have a large number of people in close contact.

The CDC says scabies occurs worldwide among all economic classes, and can be transmitted from one person to another before symptoms begin to show.

Scabies is not typically fatal on its own, but can lead to bacterial infections that can be deadly, especially among the elderly. Zeni's family alleges her Walker County nursing home was negligent in allowing her disease to progress so far that it led to her death. If properly diagnosed, it can be treated with a simple prescription lotion or cream, according to the CDC.

The Smyrna woman said she took her mother to a Marietta dermatologist four times over the course of two months on the advice of the home, but did not receive the proper diagnosis. That doctor believed an allergic reaction to medication was causing the rash, the daughter said.

After finding no help, the woman took her mother to a different dermatologist, who diagnosed the parasites right away.

"The dermatologist we went to about a week ago, they scraped (her) hand ... put it under the microscope, and two minutes later, they confirmed scabies," she said.

The daughter said her mother has shown an almost instant improvement and is expected to completely recover from the scabies.

“Once she got the proper medications last week, she looked tremendously better within just a couple of days,” she said. “I was over there Sunday, and instead of crying and screaming in pain and not sleeping, she was blowing kisses.”