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4-star care is answer to a prayer

SALVATION Army stalwart Agnes

Dempster asked for divine guidance when she needed to go into care after a heart attack.

Agnes, 84, found the choice of homes bewildering. 'It's a big step at my age and I didn't want to make the wrong move,' she says.

Luckily, the former Sally Army volunteer from Blackpool was able to take advantage of a hotel-style star rating system that grades homes in her area according to standards of care. Agnes chose the £236-a-week Langdales home, which has four stars, signifying an 'excellent standard of care and facilities'. The star rating system played a big part in helping her decide. 'Knowing that the home had an objective endorsement certainly helped and I fell in love with the place as soon as I walked through the door last February', she says. 'Everything about Langdales is first class - the home is even better than I ever expected'.

Agnes used the star rated system operated by Residential and Domiciliary Care Benchmarking (RDB), a non-profit organisation set up with the help of Social Services in Brighton.

The scheme spread to Blackpool, and other local authorities under pressure from the Government to improve standards of care for the elderly, are keen to follow suit. Star rating could become a national standard within a couple of years.

Under the system, homes are subjected to a yearly examination and awarded between two and five stars, depending on the quality of care.

With more elderly people going into care, and concerns about the variable standards in homes, the RDB system helps the public to make a more informed choice. Steve Newton, operations director of Kent Health Care, which owns Langdales and six other homes in Lancashire, says: 'The system is the way forward for the care industry to show a commitment to quality.

In the absence of a nationwide rating system, Experts advise relatives to visit at least three homes before deciding.

By Edmund Tirbutt

They should pay particular attention to factors such as staff training, numbers and whether residents appear well-groomed.

Homes that are members of trade organisations such as the National Care Homes Association, or the Registered Nursing Home Association, have passed quality checks that are more stringent than the basic requirements of local authorities.

Both bodies can provide details of local homes and are willing to give guidance over the phone. And, Care Choices, a publishing company near Cambridge, provides free directories of homes in particular areas.

Sheila Scott, chief executive of the National Care Homes Association, says: 'Though initial visits to homes are normally made by relatives, there is much to be said for potential residents visiting the home themselves. People should not just look around, but sit down and have a cup of tea and talk to the manager or the matron, and a few of the residents'.

Sue Askham of Health Care Funding, which provides plans to pay for nursing home fees, supports the care rating system. 'Cost alone isn't always an accurate guide to a home.

Care plans can remove worries about having to pay nursing home fees. Last December, Askham arranged a policy for an 84-year old woman. In return for the one-off payment of £26,301, her fees of £16,899 a year are paid for the rest of her life. Askham says: 'The plan also had the benefit of bringing her below the inheritance tax threshold'.

■ *Residential and Domiciliary Care Benchmarking 01273 411811, Registered Nursing Home Association 0121 454 2511, the National Care Homes Association 020 7831 7090, Care Choices 0800 389 2077, Health Care Funding 01246 431122.*