

“ WHY DON’T WE PAY THE PEOPLE WHO WIPE OUR PARENTS’ AND GRANDPARENTS’ NOSES, ET AL, BETTER? WHY ARE THE BEST STAFF INVARIABLY THE CLEANERS AND THE SUPPORT WORKERS, THE LOWEST PAID? — COLUMNIST CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD

COMMENT

Care of old people is the outrage



CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD

As my late uncle Tommy always said, “Old age ain’t for sissies.”

He had it relatively easy, that said: he lived in his own apartment, independent but for a wonderful personal support worker who came a few times a week to help him shower, almost until the end, when he was only briefly hospitalized before he died.

He endured his share of the small humiliations, of course, but never had to go into a care home, one of those institutions much in the news since Tuesday, when a nurse who worked in two of them was arrested and charged with no fewer than eight counts of first-degree murder.

This is Elizabeth (Beth) Wettlaufer, a 49-year-old in Woodstock, Ont., who police said administered a drug, which they did not identify, to eight men and women, seven of whom lived at the Caressant Care home in Woodstock, the eighth at Meadow Park in nearby London, Ont.

The youngest was Arpad Horvath, 75; the oldest was Mary Zurawinski, 96, with most of the others in their

concerning conduct that happens in care homes.

I call them that for simplicity.

There are retirement homes, nursing homes and homes that offer a continuum of care, so that as you grow ever more feeble, you can just shift wings or floors. There are homes that are high-end and expensive, lots in the murky middle, and some that are sad and small of urine.

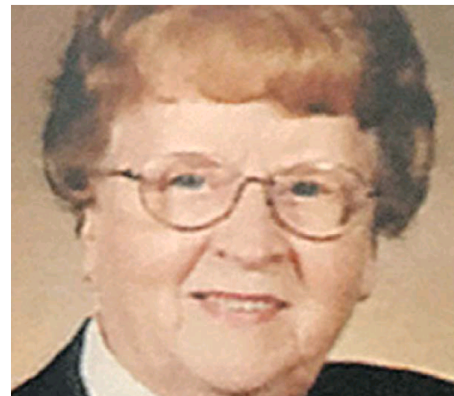
What they have in common is a population that may be as vulnerable and sick as infants in a children’s hospital, but who have as a group little of the winning charm or physical attributes. Old people can be a handful, as was my own late mother (and may she be sipping a rye-and-water wherever she is, and ruing her wretched daughter still).

Once, during one of the many hospital stays that marked the last couple of years of her life, she asked, in a mortifyingly loud voice, “Don’t they have any white nurses here?” She was frightened and bellicose, and in all her various hospitalizations, there was only one nurse who figured out how to manage her.

This woman was so good, and so dedicated, not just to my mother but to all her patients, that other nurses promptly lodged a grievance against her.

This is not to say that all elderly people are a pain in the arse, but rather that it may be more difficult to muster kindly feelings toward an incontinent old guy covered in liver spots who shouts at you than it is for a precious two-pound baby.

Care homes are inherently dangerous places, I’d say, having been to many, two on a regular basis to visit my mother and a great-aunt: a group of ill old



Alleged victims of Elizabeth Wettlaufer, a 49-year-old nurse who police say administered a lethal drug to residents, include, clockwise from top left, Maureen Pickering, 79, Gladys Millard, 87, Arpad Horvath, 75, and James Silcox, 84.

Nurse had just finished second stint in rehab

Arrest ‘really hard to believe,’ neighbours say

LIAM CASEY

WOODSTOCK, ONT. • Just a few weeks ago, Elizabeth Wettlaufer gave away her beloved dog, Nashville, a spry Jack Russell terrier.

Her friends thought the move odd, but they now wonder if the 49-year-old nurse knew what was coming.

On Tuesday, Wettlaufer was charged with eight counts of first-degree murder

second such time, Gilbert said.

A Facebook page for a Beth Wettlaufer, whose photo, education and employment records match that of Elizabeth Wettlaufer, makes reference to what appears to be a struggle with substance abuse.

“My own voice called to me in the darkness. Others hands lifted me when I chose the light. One year ago today I woke up not dead. 365 days clean and sober,” says a post from September 2015.

But poetry posted under the pseudonym Betty Weston but copyrighted to Beth Wettlaufer on allpoetry.com includes verses that are far less lighthearted.

was made subject of a peace bond earlier this month with 10 conditions, including that she live with her parents in Woodstock and refrain from acting as a caregiver to anyone.

In addition, she was banned from possessing insulin or any other medication unless it was for her own use. She was also barred by the court order from visiting any long-term care facility, nursing or retirement home, or hospital unless she needed medical treatment.

Charlene Puffer said she lived down the hall from Wettlaufer and described her neighbour as a decent person. She said Wettlaufer was quiet and loved her pets, which also included two cats. Gilbert said Wettlaufer lived alone and court records indicate she filed for divorce in 2008.

Records from the College of Nurses of Ontario show Wettlaufer was first regis-

‘Extremely distressing,’ Wynne says

SENIORS Continued from NP1

Gilbert said Wettlaufer recently told her she had just gotten out of rehab, for the second time.

The Canadian Association of Retired Persons (CARP) said in a statement Tuesday that it was shocked by the alleged serial killings.

“The age of the victims and their medical condition should play no part in how our justice system pursues those who violate the laws of our land and cause harm to another,” said CARP policy

CARE HOMES ARE INHERENTLY DANGEROUS

PLACES.

80s or 90s. They died over a seven-year period ending in August 2014.

Such prosecutions can be incredibly tricky, as anyone of a certain age who remembers the case of Susan Nelles, a nurse at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, will know. Nelles was accused in the deaths of four babies there, alleged to have given them overdoses of a heart drug called digoxin, but the prosecution fell apart at the preliminary hearing, she was discharged and no one else was ever arrested.

The lesson was clear, though: if you're going to criminally charge a nurse with murder and allege a drug overdose, you better be as familiar with the drug as an expert pharmacist, and you'd best have all your ducks in a row.

The police in the latest case in Woodstock were incredibly careful with the information they released, a recognition perhaps of the media- and social media-drenched world in which we live, and the irreparable damage that can be wreaked in an instant upon those who are merely accused.

But though the alleged conduct here is at the extreme end of the spectrum, it is fair to say that there is plenty of evidence of other

people, often visited only irregularly by their own families, at the mercy of strangers.

In the Ontario Legislature Tuesday, on the news of the Woodstock arrest, there were members asking the "hard" questions, such as how could seven deaths at a single home have gone undiscovered for so long? What was the matter with our system?

Those are in fact the easy questions.

The hard ones are: why don't we pay the people who wipe our parents' and grandparents' noses, et al, better? Why are the best staff invariably the cleaners and the support workers, the lowest paid? Why did it take so long for Ontario to finally make sprinklers mandatory in all care homes?

I remember the Easter Sunday I spent at a downtown Toronto hospital where my mother then was.

She was on the mend by then, on the general medical ward which housed mostly old women like her. There were almost no visitors in the place, and the few I saw were like me, middle-aged daughters, feeding our mothers hospital mystery meat out in the hall.

The care of old people in Canada — indeed, their place in our world — is the actual outrage.

National Post
cbtatchford@postmedia.com

der in connection with the deaths of seniors in her care — seven of them at a nursing home just a 15-minute walk from her apartment in Woodstock, Ont.

As news broke about her charges, her friends gathered outside the apartment building, trying to piece it all together.

"She was a happy-go-lucky lady," said Nancy Gilbert, who lived downstairs from Wettlaufer's fifth-floor apartment. "It's hard to believe, really, really hard to believe."

She and Wettlaufer went out for dinner just a few weeks ago. During that meal, Wettlaufer told her she had just gotten out of a rehab facility in Toronto — it was the

One gruesome poem titled Inevitable, is written from the perspective of a serial killer. One graphic line from that poem reads: "Heart beats then sprays/as this next victim pays/her deft dagger's bill."

The works — many of them receiving praise and constructive criticism from other members of allpoetry.com — also include poems about nature, working in a nursing home and family relationships.

The profile picture for Betty Weston is the same as one of Wettlaufer's Facebook profiles.

Amid police concerns that she would commit a "serious personal injury," Wettlaufer

worked as a nurse in August 1995 but resigned on Sept. 30 of this year and is no longer a registered nurse.

Her friends said they hadn't seen the nurse much in recent weeks and she told them she was living with her parents.

Gilbert said Wettlaufer had told her about a developmentally challenged child she had been helping take care of, which only furthered the friend's disbelief at the charges.

Before she worked at Caressant Care, Wettlaufer worked at Christian Horizons, a faith-based charitable organization that works with people with developmental disabilities.

The organization said Wettlaufer left in June 2007 and noted that the allegations she now faces are not connected to her employment with Christian Horizons.

"We are shocked and saddened by these tragic deaths, and our thoughts and prayers go out to the families and the Woodstock community," the organization's CEO, Janet Noel-Annable, said in a statement.

Wettlaufer appeared in court Tuesday morning and was remanded into custody until her next court hearing on Nov. 2. A lawyer for Wettlaufer could not immediately be reached.

The Canadian Press, with files from Postmedia News

director and general counsel Wade Poziomka.

News of the arrest quickly spread to the Ontario legislature, where members observed a moment of silence shortly before noon.

Asked how the alleged killings went undetected for so long, Premier Kathleen Wynne said it would be inappropriate for her to comment on an ongoing investigation, but that it was an "extremely distressing and tragic, tragic thing for all of the families involved."

Sabrina Sabic, who worked as a student nurse's aide at the Woodstock nursing home, stood near the facility with friends shortly after news of Wettlaufer's arrest broke.

"It's shocking and sad to know that this happened to so many people, and it just seems with my experience there that people working there should have paid closer attention," the 17-year-old said.

The other six victims have been identified as Maurice Granat, 84; Gladys Millard, 87; Helen Matheson, 95; Mary Zurawinski, 96; Helen Young, 90, and Maureen Pickering, 79.

Caressant Care Nursing and Retirement Homes Ltd., which operates 15 facilities primarily based in small towns, said it is co-operating with police.

Postmedia News, with files from The Canadian Press



DAVE CHIDLEY / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Seven of the alleged victims lived at a long-term care residence, Caressant Care Woodstock, across the street from where Tori Stafford was abducted in April 2009.