

Fighting for loving care for the people we love.

When we can no longer care for our loved ones at home we must place their care in the hands of others. There is no greater act of trust. When that care is loving and tender, it can enhance life. But when it falls short, as **June Crockett** discovered, it is an upsetting and frustrating challenge to find a solution.

When your loved one is ill, finding the best place to care for them can be a long and often heartbreaking journey. June Crockett knows this only too well because it is a journey she has bravely made twice in her life.

Today June is continuing to care for her mother Vera who will turn 90 this year. Vera was only 47 years old when she lost her husband and was left to raise a family on her own. But she was always a strong and independent woman.

As Vera got older, June started to notice some tell-tale signs of forgetfulness and confusion. When Vera was diagnosed with dementia, June began to lovingly care for her mother. But over the next few years, it became clear that Vera would need full-time professional care. So June and her family arranged for Vera to move into a private nursing home nearby.

"It was an ordinary house with only a few residents. My first impression was that it was a home away from home."

But that first impression soon proved false.

"They said they had various activities for residents but every time I went down, no matter what time it was, they were never doing anything. I got the impression that as long as my mother sat in the chair and made no demands, everything would be fine. But if she behaved like a normal human being, it was a problem."

Then June started getting the phone calls.

"They rang me to say that Mum had 'kicked off' – that was the phrase they used. But rather than trying to calm her, or talk to her, they just called an ambulance and sent her to hospital."

Agitation is a common feature of dementia so each time Vera was sent to hospital they could find no real reason to keep her. This pattern continued for months.

Every time her mother became slightly agitated June would be called and Vera would be sent back to hospital. On one occasion, the nursing home even called the police to deal with Vera's agitation.

"Four big policeman for an 89 year old woman. It would terrify me, let alone my mother".

The home was clearly unable and unwilling to care for June's mother. Eventually they made it clear they didn't want her back.

"It was so hard for me to put my mother in a home and then to have her treated in that way. I look at mummy sometimes and the way she acts is very like the way a child would act. But you wouldn't treat a child the way she was treated. I was actually told once "Remember that is not your mother anymore". They should never say things like that. Because somewhere underneath her disease, she is still there. It's still Vera. Even if you only get a glimpse of her every now and then – in something she says or in her cheeky wee smile."

June was so frustrated with the care her mother was receiving because she knew that better care was possible. She had found it before with her husband John.

From the moment John first met June at a bustling party until the moment she said her last goodbye to him, they lived a long and happy life together, filled with family, laughter and love. This quiet, private and dashing man in uniform was the centre of June's world. A world that fell apart when John was diagnosed with lung cancer.

"John worked with the airlines and he would be away for months. One time he rang me – he wasn't feeling well. When he arrived home I got the shock of my life. He had lost so much weight and was the most awful colour."

John started chemotherapy but sadly his condition quickly deteriorated. Having spent months in busy, cramped hospital wards and cancer units, June knew her husband needed more specialised care.

"We were told John had about a month to live and initially the social workers said he had to leave hospital and they wanted to put him into a home. I objected and insisted he go to a hospice."

Once John was moved to the hospice, June found the level of care and respect she had been searching for.

"It was such a pleasure to see John there. They were more than good to him. They gave him back his dignity."

The palliative care that lies at the heart of the hospice ethos is designed to cater for the needs of both patients and their families.

“You see the focus is on the person and not the disease. To make the patient feel that they are somebody and not just a number. That’s as important as all the medical work. “

As a result of the loving care he received, John’s final days with his family were particularly special.

“The staff gave us our privacy. And I spent the last couple of days with him continually. I don’t know if he was aware I was there or not. But I never left his side. And then one night, I was sitting holding his hand and he just took three breaths – and he was away.”

Providing the right level of care – when and where it is needed – can make such a difference to patients and their families. In June’s case, the care her husband received in the hospice literally changed her life.

June was so inspired and grateful that she now volunteers in that same hospice.

“It’s my way of giving back for all they did for John.”

June’s mother is now in a different nursing home. One that is properly staffed and places as much emphasis on her mum’s dignity as they do on her medical needs.

“Mum has her own room now and there is a lot of activities and a garden that she can sit in.”

The staff no longer ring June if her mother “kicks off”. They are trained to cope with, and understand, the agitation of a proud and independent 89 year-old woman.

“That makes such a difference. It’s such peace of mind.”

Today June’s life is busier than ever between visiting her mother, doting on her grandchildren and the many hours she spends volunteering in the hospice. She wouldn’t have it any other way.

“People ask me if it’s depressing. But it’s actually the opposite. The one thing you’re not allowed say is “I know how you feel”. Even somebody like me, who had my husband go through the hospice. Because you don’t know how people feel. “

But for someone like June, who has given so much of herself to the care of others, that makes perfect sense.

“The end of someone’s life is such a private, intimate and personal experience. That’s why the level of care needs to be just as intimate and personal.”