

The Media Still Gets It All Wrong

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It must have been very frustrating for seniors housing operators, and especially assisted living providers, to have watched the news these past several weeks when they have all been thrown in with nursing facilities. Not to throw nursing homes under the bus, but most of the reported deaths in “long-term care facilities” have been in nursing facilities, not assisted living, even though the latter has had its unfortunate share. But the media rarely distinguishes between the two.

So, one recent night, just to get our blood boiling, we tuned into Erin Burnett’s nightly CNN show. In the segment, a “nursing home director” explained how her facility in Oregon was able to stave off the coronavirus while another “home” 20 miles away had 117 cases and 28 deaths. Ms. Burnett kept referring to her facility as a nursing home, despite the fact that on the screen CNN kept on displaying the actual name, Laurelhurst House Assisted Living. Hellooo. Assisted living, not nursing.

As we all know, there is a big difference both in room layout, frailty of residents, amenities, staff and length of stay, not to mention private pay vs. government funded. To make matters worse, the assisted living community Ms. Burnett kept on calling a nursing home has only 38 units, way below average in size. And the actual nursing facility 20 miles away has more than 100 beds. It would have been a perfect time to highlight the difference: small, cozy assisted living, with no COVID, compared with that nursing home, a different story.

The reality is that in many cases, whether you had COVID in your building or not, it was just a matter of luck, or bad luck. Yes, some operators were on top of it very early, but it was a silent killer that could not be seen, especially without sufficient tests for staff early on. The actual nursing facility in this story probably has five times the staff of the assisted living community, so there were five times the number of potential asymptomatic workers coming in each day, not to mention family members. And all it takes is one of them to wreak havoc.

Now, how would CNN find a 38-unit assisted living community in Oregon to feature on its nightly Erin Burnett show? We asked. Apparently, that ED was pandemic. Not likely. But we still come back to why, if “assisted living” was in the name, they called it a nursing home? Are the folks at CNN that ignorant? Or just biased? We won’t answer that.

And then several days later, in a New York Times story, a guitarist for Bruce Springsteen pledged “to Take On Nursing Home After a Family Scare.” That was in the headline. The problem is that it was not a nursing home, but an assisted living and memory care community operated by Brookdale Senior Living. And it had nothing to do with COVID, but an unfortunate case of a wandering memory care resident, who was found.

Assisted living is not a new phenomenon. We could understand this confusion, or utter lack of being able to differentiate, back in the early 1990s when Paul Klaassen (founder of Sunrise Senior Living) was at every microphone he could find explaining the difference between the “new” assisted living model and the “old” nursing home model. But last time we checked, we are living in 2020, 30 years later. Come on mainstream media, wake up and do some research. Better yet, go visit an assisted living community that has been built in the last 10 years, even 20 years. Maybe you will learn something.