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## **Wandering and Elopement Can Have Catastrophic Consequences**

by Levin &amp; Perconti

The decision to have a loved one spend his or her final years in a **nursing home** is a difficult one to make. The primary reason many families make this decision is that the family is unable to provide the quality of care to their loved one that they believe will be available in a professional setting. This is particularly true when the older family member is living with dementia. Unfortunately some of these nursing homes act negligently, and that negligence can result in wandering or elopement. As a recent story from Washington shows, the effects of wandering and elopement can be catastrophic.

### **What are Wandering and Elopement?**

Wandering and elopement are two separate but related phenomena. Elopement refers to a nursing home resident to leave the nursing home unsupervised and unnoticed and the resident is put in danger as a result. The term “wandering” applies to situations where residents are allowed to move aimlessly throughout the nursing home and the residents are put in danger because, due to their medical conditions, they lack an ability to appreciate danger. Both of these problems stem from a facility’s failure to properly supervise and care for its residents.

### **What is the Worst Possible Outcome of Wandering or Elopement?**

Wandering and elopement can result in serious injuries or even in death. News Station KHQ reported last month that an 89 year old Alzheimer’s patient was allowed to leave his Washington nursing home unsupervised and, for a period of time, unnoticed. The man was found dead in a backyard hours later. At the time of the report the man’s cause of death had not been released. Without additional information it is impossible to know whether this man’s immediate death could have been prevented had the elopement not occurred, it is easy to imagine hundreds of scenarios in which a man in his position could have been seriously injured or killed by this sort of failure to supervise.

### **How Common is Wandering and Elopement?**

According to the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners wandering and elopement are serious problems. They cite statistics that show that more than 34,000 Alzheimer patients are able to elope from their homes or care facilities each year. According to the organization, wandering and elopement can seriously increase the risk to dementia patients. Patients who wander are at an increased risk of falling. Those who fall or elope run the risk of entering areas that enter hazardous materials or tools that could injure them. Patients can wander into otherwise unsafe areas like dark stairwells. A resident who elopes may make his or her way to an unsafe neighborhood. A resident who wanders may find him or herself in the room of a violent or otherwise dangerous resident. Those who elope may be taken advantage of strangers outside the nursing home. Elopement also comes with dangers of exposure, traffic dangers, and the danger of missing scheduled medication doses or other medical treatments.

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