

## Homes, Not Nursing Homes

“Replacing the Nursing Home” by Peter Uhlenberg, in *The Public Interest* (Summer 1997), 1112  
16th St. N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Nursing homes, which now house 1.7 million elderly Americans, cost too much (more than \$45,000 a year for a middle-range one) and provide poor care in a dehumanized environment. The indictment is familiar, but Uhlenberg, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, argues that something can be done: phase out the government’s \$50 billion annual subsidy, and channel it instead to “cost-effective, noninstitutional alternatives,” including home care, “assisted living,” group homes, hospices, and rehabilitation programs.

The \$80-billion-a-year nursing-home industry developed after World War II largely as a result of government support, Uhlenberg points out. Fewer than 200,000 people lived in nursing homes in the mid-1940s. The Hill-Burton Act of 1946 provided money to build nonprofit nursing homes, while the Federal Housing Administration guaranteed mortgage loans to for-profit ones. After Medicaid was established in 1965, the government would pay the full cost of long-term care for poor older persons in nursing homes—but not in other settings. The “deinstitutionalization” of mental hospitals, starting in the 1960s, provided another boost to nursing homes. By the early 1970s, more than one million elderly folk were living in such institutions.

Today, Uhlenberg writes, “all but the very wealthy face the threat in old age of having to transfer their life savings to a nursing home and

becoming wards of the state.” In return, they usually receive “unloving care” from low-paid, unskilled aides. The quality of care could be improved by raising salaries, reducing workloads, and providing more training, he says, but that would only make care even more outrageously expensive.

Some extremely disabled individuals must be institutionalized, the author concedes. But roughly 80 percent of the older persons who are dependent on others for help in dressing, eating, and other routine daily activities live in their own home, he points out, and even more could remain at home if government policies were reoriented. Spending on home health care has been growing rapidly in recent years, in part because Medicare and Medicaid requirements have been eased. Medicare expenditures increased from \$1.9 billion in 1986 to \$9.7 billion in 1994. The regulations should be revised, Uhlenberg says, to encourage much greater use of home health care.

Studies indicate that the cost of providing shelter, food, personal assistance, and medical care at home is generally less than at a nursing facility, Uhlenberg says. And the quality of the care is superior, in part because the individuals or their family members “have greater control over who provides the care and how well [it] is provided”—not to mention the fact that family and friends can continue to help care for the person. Institutionalizing someone puts an end to all these advantages, Uhlenberg writes.

## The Redskin Fallacy

“How Indians Got to Be Red” by Nancy Shoemaker, in *The American Historical Review*  
(June 1997), 400 A St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.

Many scholars today believe that Europeans invented the idea of race and imposed their notions of racial identity on others. But in at least one case, argues Shoemaker, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, a non-European group named itself.

That group is the Indians of North America. It has long been thought that they were labeled *red* by early European explorers—not because of their skin color, which the Europeans usually described as tawny or brown, but because they often daubed themselves with red paint. Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus made red

a racial category in his *Systema Naturae* (1740).

But Shoemaker says that records of early meetings between Europeans and Indians show that the Indians had already taken the name red for themselves. In 1725, for example, a French priest in Mobile, Alabama, recounted a story told by a Taensas chief involving three men, one white, one black, and one red. The priest felt compelled to explain to his readers that the latter was an Indian, “for they call themselves in their language ‘Red Men.’” In a 1726 transcript of an effort by the English to

mediate a peace between the Creeks and Cherokees in South Carolina, the Indians referred to each other as “red people,” while the English called them Indians.

Why did the Indians refer to themselves as red? Among some tribes of the Southeast, origin myths may have provided the inspiration. The Mesquakies of the lower Mississippi valley, for example, believed that the first humans were created out of clay “red as the reddest blood,” one scholar wrote. The tribe’s name means “red Earths.”

A second possibility is that Indians responded with red after the Europeans began calling themselves white. The first Europeans in the New World thought of themselves as Christians, but with the arrival of black slaves in the Carolinas in the early 18th century—some of them Christians—they began referring to themselves as white. Red was a natural

response for the Indians, Shoemaker notes, because red and white already had strong paired symbolic meanings: red generally stood for war, white for peace. Some tribes may have borrowed the color red from tribes like the Mesquakies.

It is unclear if the Indians saw red and white as racial categories (i.e. biologically linked to social, political, and cultural characteristics) or only as the equivalent of “school colors.” But whites in the 18th century did embrace race thinking. “It would take another century for the science of race to reach its full height and then one more century for the idea of race to be seriously questioned,” writes Shoemaker. “Perhaps we are now at the brink of the apocalypse, when the idea of race will be abandoned entirely and another system of categories will emerge to take its place.”

## PRESS & MEDIA

### *Tabloids Invade TV News!*

“Local News: The Biggest Scandal on TV” by Steven D. Stark, in the *Washington Monthly* (June 1997), 1611 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009; “News Lite” by James McCartney, in *American Journalism Review* (June 1997), 8701 Adelphi Road, Adelphi, Md. 20783–1716.

No matter what the community in America, the local TV news is much the same: crimes, disasters, and fluff, all served up by two relentlessly personable anchorpersons and their eager-to-please young correspondents, reporting and chatting “live” from various corners of the community and nation. It’s not just their shallowness that makes these news shows so objectionable, argues Stark, author of *Glued to the Set* (1997); it’s the fact that they’ve become so immensely influential. Sixty-five percent of adults in a 1996 survey reported watching the local TV news, compared with only 42 percent who tuned in to TV network newscasts.

Local news shows once were “an insignificant part of the television day,” Stark recalls. But in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, stations began to grasp the shows’ profit potential. They are relatively cheap to produce, and the local stations can keep the profits (which they can’t do with network programming). Local newscasts grew to a half-hour, right before the evening network news; then to an hour, even 90 minutes.

Taking the advice of media consultants, Stark notes, the stations began offering

“happy talk” news, with personable “anchors” as the principal attraction, and tabloidlike “action news” (a.k.a. “eyewitness news”), with “a high story count, an increasing number of striking visuals, and exciting upbeat music.” The formula worked. Such newscasts soon began to generate between one-third and one-half of local stations’ total profits.

By the 1980s, communications satellites and other technological advances enabled local stations to send their own correspondents to national and international events, scooping the network news programs. The Cable News Network, established in 1980, also began selling news footage to local news operations, and local affiliates of the Big Three broadcast networks then forced them to share their own jealously guarded film. Gradually, says Stark, local stations became “the average viewer’s window on the whole world,” and the locals’ tabloid style “became the trademark of national and international coverage.”

Now, the networks themselves are going “tabloid,” with the trend especially evident in the last year or so, says McCartney. A typical NBC evening news broadcast reports only