

**No training or experience? You're hired** The growing demand for eldercare has left some people turning to under-the-table help by Siri Agrell

*Globe and Mail*, July 3, 2007 at 8:54 AM EDT

The high-profile lawyer that Pat Irwin was scheduled to meet at a Toronto Starbucks arrived clutching a Louis Vuitton purse, and left her car idling in the parking lot.

Waiting in the back seat was a young woman who had just been picked up at Pearson International Airport. Hired as a caregiver to look after the lawyer's mother, she spoke little English, had never lived in Canada and had no experience in geriatric care.

"I said, 'Are you nuts?' " recalled Ms. Irwin, an eldercare consultant who helps people find professional assistance for their aging parents.

After hearing Ms. Irwin's opinion, the lawyer ended up not hiring the caregiver.

With a rapidly greying population, many Canadians are finding themselves in need of live-in care for their parents. But as agencies and community-based care centres struggle to keep up with the growing demand for at-home eldercare, a "grey market" of unqualified nannies has emerged, hired by those who cannot find – or afford – professional resources.

"There's a huge under-the-table network of this," Ms. Irwin said. "And they are paid \$400 a week."

In 2006, 3,544 people arrived in Canada to work as live-in caregivers, Citizenship and Immigration Canada says.

Professional live-in care for elderly adults costs up to \$150 a day, and is usually provided through private agencies that employ staff who are bonded, highly trained, police-checked and insured.

But Canadian eldercare experts say people do not always apply those standards when looking for individuals to care for their parents, and a growing number of caregivers have no training whatsoever despite the difficulties of looking after the aged. "There is a lot of expectation that caregivers will take on skills like giving medications and giving injections and dealing with catheters and the like," says Norah Keating, a family gerontologist at the University of Alberta who studies the care of elderly Canadians. "There has been a de-professionalization of care across the system."

According to a Statistics Canada study released in May, only one of every 30 seniors aged 65 and over lived in a licensed or government-funded or approved home for the aged in the fiscal year 2004/05.

Many others rely on community care, or are looked after by a neighbour or friend. But some are turning to hired help using newspaper ads, Craigslist postings or word of mouth to find "granny nannies" – almost all of whom have no formal training in the field.

And some families are employing women living in Canada illegally.

"People are hiring the cleaning lady who has always been with them, or somebody's nanny who is no longer working for another family and is available," said Martha Russel, president of Toronto-based eldercare agency Integracare. "It evolves from good-meaning people but it can create a problem."

Integracare employs only experienced, trained caregivers, and Ms. Russel said when families arrive at her agency they are often looking to replace an under-the table employee.

"They'll say, I should have come to you sooner, because we now realize that our mother or father was not getting the care we thought they were getting," she said.

Some of her clients have hired a woman only to discover later that she'd handed off the duties to a sister or cousin they had never met.

Other families received phone calls from caregivers telling them they quit, or were going on vacation, as of right then.

And in the occasional case, there have been issues of abuse. "There's no one there to monitor them," Ms. Russel said. "It's not that the families don't care, they're just not aware. You need someone who goes in just to see if someone has bruises they didn't have before."

The hazards of under-the-table care do not apply just to its elderly recipients.

Coco Diaz, a program manager for Intercede, an Ontario advocacy group for domestic workers, says the grey market often exploits recent immigrants from the Caribbean and Philippines. They don't receive adequate wages or work regular shifts.

"It's long working hours, but it is not recognized that they are working," she said. "It's an abuse. ... It's just a way to have cheap labour. They take advantage of them."

Intercede does not represent anyone living in Canada illegally, but Ms. Diaz says she has heard of women who are providing around-the-clock care without health-care coverage or benefits.

Pat Irwin, who describes herself as the Mike Holmes of eldercare ("I come in and clean up the mess," she explains, much like contractor Mr. Holmes fixes botched renos), said she is amazed by families who pay her \$125 in hourly consultant fees, but expect a live-in caregiver to charge less than \$500 a week.

"I'll tell you one thing: the money you're saving, you will end up paying for it some way or another," Ms. Irwin said.

People must change their perceptions about eldercare, she said, and recognize that older Canadians deserve the best resources available.

"You think, Mum's just sitting there reading, so it doesn't matter who's watching her," she said. "Well we don't earn our money when things go well, we earn our money when things go badly. That's when the expertise and the training kicks in."

