

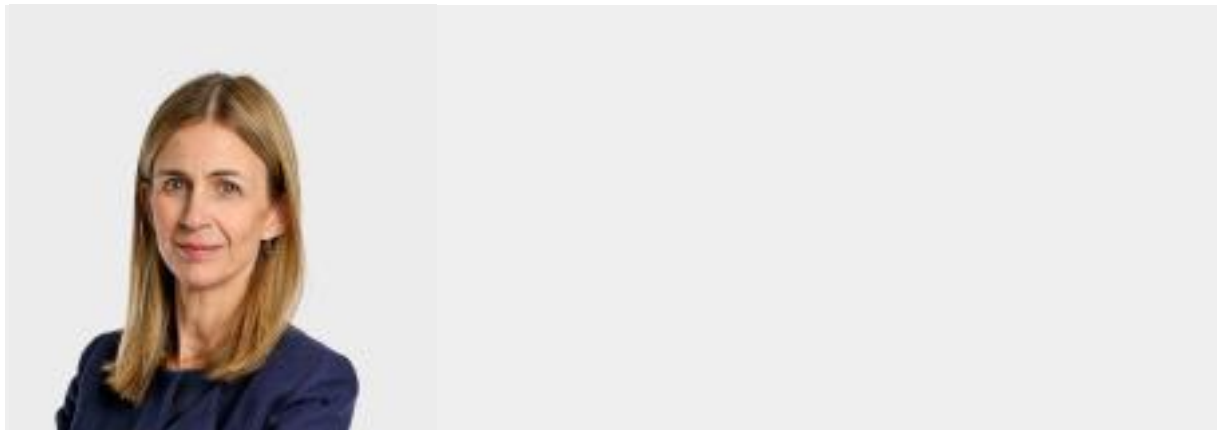
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The social care crisis is about more than money

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Homes for the elderly function best when they are staffed by people who see caring as a vocation, not low-skilled labour



Last night I dreamt of care homes. I've spent a week looking at places for my father, who has had dementia for 12 years and now needs specialised nursing. There are the average, the diabolical and the inspirational, all within a few miles of his town.

Surprisingly, money doesn't seem to have the greatest effect on quality. The most expensive felt like a prison with the dementia inmates locked in, staff vacancies, grey sloppy food, a regimented timetable and dark, echoing corridors. No one made eye contact and my instinct was to run away, yet I am still thinking about those I left behind.

The most impressive was the cheapest not-for-profit charity home where even the handyman stopped for a chat while putting up a curtain, there were packets of digestives on tables, the vicar popped by, the Brownies sang a song, and there were signs on each door with instructions such as: "Mrs Jones likes her tea lukewarm, her hand shaken not squeezed and a cuddle at night". The staff were motivated, kind and chatty. Everyone wandered freely, couples were welcomed, their bedrooms were covered in cards and photos, the garden was full of benches and bird feeders and when they demanded liver and bacon it was provided instead of pizza. But it has a long waiting list so I should be putting my name down rather than my father's.

Searching for a care home is harder and more heartbreaking than looking at schools. Virtually all primaries are optimistic places full of paintings, smiles and chatter; few care homes are as hopeful.

Financially it's tough to run a care home. At least 148 businesses became insolvent in 2017, up 83 per cent on the previous year; 2,492 residents were evicted with nowhere to go because their homes closed, up 39 per cent on the previous year. This is particularly harsh for those with dementia who need familiarity. They are also often the ones being charged the highest rates. According to a report this week by the Alzheimer's Society, providers can add as much as 40 per cent to the bill for dementia patients. About 850,000 people have dementia in Britain and pay an average of £100,000 for their end of life care. Increasingly, families cannot find anywhere that will take them, so they end up on hospital wards.

There are also not enough staff for care homes, with vacancy rates running at 11.4 per cent and 90,000 places unfilled. That's before Brexit curbs the number of EU migrants. Caring is viewed as "unskilled labour" but the British need to see it as a vocation and a worthwhile career.

The elderly staying at home often aren't faring any better. According to Age UK, 1.4 million older people are now not getting the necessary help to carry out essential tasks such as washing and dressing, a 20 per cent increase in only two years. There are already 7.6 million people caring for elderly relatives but even with their help the Local Government Association is warning of a £3.5 billion funding deficit by 2025.

The NHS fill the gaps. When my mother got sepsis this week and was rushed into the emergency assessment unit at her local hospital, the majority of those on her ward had dementia. Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England, said recently that the equivalent of 36 hospitals were out of action because of a lack of social care.

The care home system is in crisis yet the prime minister has given up on it. Theresa May was so scarred when she attempted her disastrous "dementia tax" in her manifesto in 2017 that she scrapped plans for a tax and settled instead for renaming Jeremy Hunt the health and social care secretary, but nothing else happened and the social care green paper has been delayed.

This week Matt Hancock, the new health and social care secretary, announced £240 million for the elderly, which could provide 71,000 more domestic care packages to help pensioners stay at home. This will alleviate some pressure on wards but it's not going to address the long-term issues. Mr Hancock hasn't been allowed to announce anything more radical, although he has been pushing

quietly for a new social care fund where payments could be deducted by employers for future care costs.

In Japan those over 40 pay a 1 per cent social insurance levy. But it's not all about money. Young entrepreneurs are beginning to look at ways of helping their grandparents with technology. One of the most impressive, Hellen Bowey's care-tech company, Alcove, provides individualised packages using devices that can cost as little as 50p. One woman with dementia was given a sign for the men's toilets to stick on the back of her front door. It stopped her from wanting to open it and she has not wandered out alone again. Other devices include sensors to ensure an elderly person has woken up and is mobile, and video calls so that carers can come fewer times a day but for more substantial, meaningful periods. As Ms Bowey says, "It's about people and culture. More cash alone can't help our ageing population."

By the end of this parliament there will be a million more people in Britain over 75 than there were at the start of it. I used to think it was my children's generation who were going to struggle in this century, paying for university tuition fees and being forced into renting while having to compete with robots for jobs. But when I look at them I feel optimistic they'll adapt. It's the ones I left in the worst care homes, staring vacantly at a TV screen, starved of company, robbed of their dignity, who need to be rescued.