

Old people are kept alive too long, says Holloway aged 84

Jason Allardyce

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Octogenarian Richard Holloway worries about the effect an aging population is having on society
COLIN HATTERSLEY/WRITER PICTURES

An influential former church leader says doctors fight too hard to keep old people alive, leading to “a medicalised existence whose sole purpose is staying alive long after any joy in doing so has fled”.

In his new book exploring the mystery of death, Richard Holloway, former bishop of Edinburgh, argues that keeping most people alive into their eighties is one of the successes of modern medicine. It is, however, having “a profoundly distorting effect on the balance of society as a whole” and places a huge financial strain on the NHS.

In *Waiting for the Last Bus*, which is out next month, he writes: “Care of the elderly is close to swamping the resources of the National Health Service, turning it into an agency for the postponement of death rather than the enhancement of life.”

The former Scottish Arts Council chairman, who was primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church between 1992 and 2000, claims “modern medicine keeps too many people alive long after any pleasure or meaning has gone from their lives”.

Instead of being “sentenced to years of mournful dissolution” many of them “long to be blown out like a candle”, says the 84-year-old, who favours legalising assisted suicide. His intervention comes amid concern over the cost of looking after older people. The Nuffield Trust has estimated that more than two-fifths of national health spending is devoted to people over 65, with an 85-year-old man on average costing the NHS about five times more than a man aged 30.

Holloway contends that old age can be bitter if experienced “not as a period of calm preparation for death but as a grim battle to keep it at bay”.

“Visiting the elderly can be a dispiriting experience if they spend their time rehearsing their ailments and complaining about the inattention of the local health professionals who are run off their feet trying to care for them. The reality is that death has rung their bell, and peace will come only when they open the door and say you got here sooner than I expected, but come in and sit down while I get my coat on.”

Peter Bennie, chairman of the British Medical Association in Scotland, said: “For every medical intervention, a judgment should be made about whether it is appropriate and proportionate, in the sense of providing a real benefit to the individual patient.

“It is equally important, however, that patients are not abandoned or denied treatment for reversible conditions or to relieve symptoms simply because they seem to be approaching the end of their life.”

Brian Sloan, chief executive of the charity Age Scotland, said he would welcome more open conversations about death and end-of-life care.

“We believe everyone should be able to have a dignified and pain-free death, with choices in how they are cared for in their final months and days,” he said. “This may include choosing to refuse certain medical interventions.

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15 comments

[M.E. Whittle](#)

Strange that this is seen by TheTimes as a Scottish issue. Perhaps its a sign of the unwisdom of splitting the NHS.

It's not just old people, Richard Holloway is right that we are all entitled to expect treatment for reversible conditions and pain relief. But its not proportionate to be spending hundred thousands on a novel treatment that might keep a 20 year old alive for an extra 6 months or a brain dead baby in intensive care while desperate parents use up their emotional energy postponing the inevitable while only hourly paid lawyers can benefit.

[David Elliman](#)

At last some common sense on this issue. I for one do not wish to be kept alive if I am demented or unable to care for myself. Please NHS, let me go when that time comes.

[Great Britain Love It or Leave It](#)

Absolutely agree with every word... well said.

J G T

Well done Richard for tackling the issue in this way, as you look around society today you do wonder if the "living longer" aspect is really that good unless you still enjoy reasonable health without the need for daily medical help in it's various forms.

[OutsidetheM25](#)

In the cases of George Soros, Michael Heseltine and Ken Clarke I have to agree all are being kept alive far too long. All are well past it, but determined to destroy Britain's future before they finally depart. Thus it is with all the aged sabotaging remoaners.

[mikey](#)

Bravo! I have often thought this. Compare the cost of medical care for elderly individuals to the cost of a teacher's salary. Invest in the education of our youth rather than the extension of the life of the elderly and perhaps we will improve society in the long run.

[Janegas](#)

The law already gives patients the right to refuse treatment. Too often in my experience it is the relatives or even the doctors who don't want to make the decision not to treat. Treating is always the easier option as it requires little thought being the automatic default position. Therefore we frequently torture our old people on the intensive care unit for a few days before they die

[Eamon McEleney](#)

It is scandalous that terminally ill citizens are not allowed to chose how they wish to depart from life. The state should have no jurisdiction over the rights of the individual on this issue.

Excellent article.

Chilled99

Sanity at last!!!

David Walton

Western society, religion and newtonian physics has made us fear death. Anyone who stands up and says consciousness survives is ridiculed yet that is where Quantum Science is taking us.

Investigating the power of consciousness through natural plant medicines such as Ayahuasca and San Pedro is illegal in the UK as they are categorised as Schedule 1 drugs - which means they have no medical benefit - yet numerous international studies have shown the tremendous medical benefits these sacred plants have, one being the removal of any fear surrounding death.

I have taken Ayahuasca and San Pedro many times and the experience is absolutely amazing, the connection to 'all that is' and the greater understanding of consciousness provides personal evidence of life beyond this three dimensional universe we consider reality.

I have seen, first hand, this happen with many people and the improvement in wellbeing these plants bring. They are natural 'herbal' remedies not pharmaceutical drugs.

Everyone in a hospice should be entitled to magic mushrooms, classified by Professor David Nutt as the safest of all recreational drugs (as measured by harm to self and harm to others), alcohol being

by far the most dangerous.

Graham Hancock with his 'banned' TedTalk, 'War on Consciousness' really sums it up.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VDfPDrsNMg>

Anthony Lewis

What a well argued, articulate and honest view Richard Holloway has on old age. Thank you.

LittleMe

Ultimately I believe their own life or death belongs to the person involved providing they are in sane mind (or were when they made the request). The law should provide a method to terminate life when a person is unable to decide, which currently (but very imperfectly) it does.

It should be everyone's right to specify conditions (eg unable to recognise family members) for termination, and it should be nobodies (particularly relatives who often hold vain hope over reality) right to gainstay this.

People should be terminated just as our pets are, with a dose of barbiturates. Anyone who has had an operation under anesthesia will know that this is completely painless (although normally one wakes from this afterwards as it sub-lethal!).

Bryan Attewell

Agree.

Doctors should respect people's wishes and provide a painless exit when the time arrives. I have no wish to be maintained in a semi vegetative state, or suffer prolonged undignified care. I don't want the value of my estate to be consumed paying for "care" in a second rate nursing home.

Of course there must be safeguards, but let people choose their own fate. I wouldn't put a dog through long term suffering and sincerely hope that when my time comes I get a quick release.

Old Boot.

It depends where you live. In the States and France there are wonderful facilities for old people, and they can live very happily until great age and with excellent backup.

These conditions are extremely - almost vanishingly rare in Britain. It is very toxic to the quality of life of both children (see many reports) and even more towards old folk.

Living there in old age is a real trial. Add ill health and 'doctors' and it must be awful.

Greyhound

@Old Boot. I think you are missing the point of the article, which is rather more challenging.

It's about indefinitely postponing death by keeping people alive with medical intervention after quality has become unattainable for them.

