Britain is ageing. When the NHS was born in 1948, almost half of Britons died before the age of 65. Now only 14 per cent do. That trend is to be celebrated, but it brings challenges. Older people find it harder to take care of themselves or find others to take care of them. Niggling health worries evolve into acute crises, and a stay in hospital quickly starts to seem like the only option.

It need not be. Reaching the elderly earlier with regular and local preventative care could make them happier and healthier and relieve pressure on the health service. Impairments considered too trivial to warrant a GP visit are part of the problem. A third of over-65s, for instance, cannot cut their toenails. That may not seem like a matter for the doctor, but half of over-85s end up needing specialist foot care each year. Mobility problems have graver consequences too. Ten Britons are killed by a fall every day. Hospital trips and ambulance call-outs could be reduced dramatically if local authorities provided opportunities for senior citizens to share such worries.
Regular contact would also help to alleviate loneliness, a health problem in itself. For almost four million the television screen is all the company on offer. Without a companion for a cup of tea their diets slip, their living conditions deteriorate, their memories fade and their mood darkens. Some end up in a consultation room just for the company.

Many charities are doing valuable work to tackle these problems. Volunteers for Age UK help retirees to eat better and get out more. Contact the Elderly, which *The Times* supported in its Christmas appeal last year, arranges monthly pensioner tea parties. Support is patchy, however, and the need to catch problems early will only intensify. By 2030 one in five people in England will be over 65. Prevention is still better than cure — for the patient and the health service.

Comments

Helen Killick Sep 16, 2016
Pity, no mention of University of the Third Age in the article. I joined when I retired and it changed my life totally. Lots of groups for every interest all for under £50 a year in our North London U3A. Worth checking out.

Susan Slater Sep 16, 2016
@Helen Killick absolutely. I have a full intellectual and social life through the U3A: rambling, theatres, fine dining, learn history . . !

Alan Thorpe Sep 16, 2016
What's the plan - keep everybody fit and healthy until their last day? In my experience it is intervention by the health
service keeping people alive that causes the burden on the NHS.

Mavis Sep 16, 2016
I have to reveal a secret. However long we remain well, we still have to die. Rather than the traditional rapid 2 year decline, modern medicine now allows us to die over several years, with loss of function, mobility and independence, giving us enough time to develop yet more diseases that require yet more intervention, and even acquire dementia. Prevention of disease is important, but we must not pretend that it will stop the inevitable. Sorry.

Andrew Middlemiss  Sep 16, 2016
And some query the need for free bus passes? Like all the good things this leader mentions, the ability to get out and about for nothing widens horizons. It's time that these passes were made into "regional" train, coach and bus passes, like the Greater Manchester pass, so that older people can make use of under used systems. Travelling off peak, wherever you want, without worrying about cost, enables a better outlook. For working people travelling a journey of, say, 20 miles for the chance of a look around a museum and a cup of tea would hold no wonder. For older (lonely) people it's a chance to get out and see the world, and so improve their outlook and health.

Alan Hawkes Sep 16, 2016
Prevention is better than cure is a great mantra, but in my mother in law it came up against an obstinacy that defeated all attempts to help her. We visited daily, carers also came daily, we took her out to give her variety in her life. Her home was adapted to her needs, but throughout her life she resented any
attempt at guidance. If we were not there to insist on its use she would not use her walking frame. So, at 94, inevitably her hubris caught up with her. She fell when not using it, broke her hip and, as so often happens, mental degeneration fast followed and she is now in a care home.

J D Robinson Sep 16, 2016
@Alan Hawkes Seems she is just like mine. You can take the horse to the water but you cannot make it drink!

Emmell Sep 16, 2016
100% correct. Indeed, if it were mathematically possible, I'd say 1000% correct, or even more.

The same applies to dental care. There was an article in this paper a few days ago (I forgot to "save" it, and can now no longer locate it) in which dentists basically advocated FEWER check-ups so as to free up more time to treat people with seriously rotting teeth. This "advice" blithely ignores the fact that regular check-ups would PREVENT small problems from becoming so bad that lengthy treatment is needed in the first place.

Stating the bleeding obvious again. And still I can't help wondering if the motivation for giving such bad advice isn't financial.