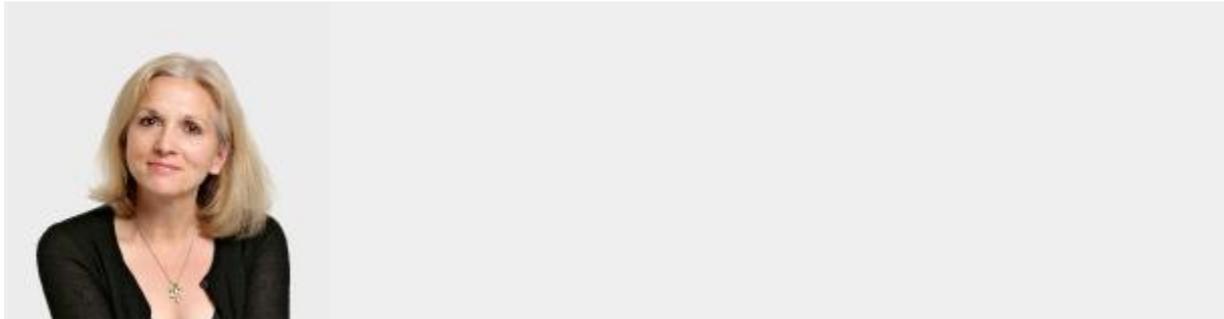


JANICE TURNER

September 17 2016, the times

We must stop pretending we'll never get old

The care crisis isn't just about money – other countries find much more imaginative ways to connect the generations



My godmother's carer was visiting when I arrived. She checked her pills, put her lunch under clingfilm in the fridge and chucked away last night's uneaten dinner. The minute I entered the flat I smelt urine, not a single mishap either: her bedside carpet was sodden. I asked the carer and she shrugged. Not unkindly, but this wasn't within her remit. And now she had to go.

If you are old, poor, housebound, with no regular contact except the saintly neighbours who do your shopping, this is how you may end up. Except even this meagre assistance from a rotating team of low-paid young women — from a private agency contracted by the council — whose names you never learn, who stay 25 minutes tops, always checking watches, cutting you short when you want to chat because they're late for a man with dementia two miles away, even that is not guaranteed.

The findings of the King's Fund report this week were truly shocking. With council budgets slashed, 26 per cent fewer people now get such help. The fragmented system means their stories are seldom told. Except the NHS hears them every day: old folk lingering for weeks or months in hospitals, £820 million of the annual health budget wasted because no care plan is in place at home. A nurse told me about the stress of looking after dementia patients, plonked in her breast cancer ward because there were no other beds.

So where is the social media campaign, where are the angry hashtags? The biggest puzzle is why ageing voters, with their political muscle and grey pound, aren't demanding change, so that in a decade or so when they're feeble, alone, and life has contracted to a single room, they will be treated like human beings? That oldster languishing in a surgical ward, pining for home . . . it may be you.

Except we never think that. We live in denial that the old are our future selves. Jeremy Paxman rants in disgust that the magazine *Mature Times* carries adverts for stairlifts and hearing aids. You'd think he was immortal, not 66. As the writer Atul Gawande says, we deal with "the final phase of the human life cycle by trying not to think about it". This mindset helps us face the bathroom mirror and an uncertain future. But it makes for appalling politics.

Unlike prisons or schools, elderly provision is not "sexy". Indeed Theresa May in her first cabinet has downgraded the minister for social care, David Mowat, to an under-secretary. Great idea just when the system is close to meltdown. Councils can't afford to pay enough. So agencies are handing back their contracts for home visits, while some nursing homes will only take richer residents who pay their own way.

The national living wage, although hugely deserved, will bump up costs. Smaller homes may go bankrupt and a major chain, as with Southern Cross, could tumble too. Where will vulnerable people go? Maybe families will muck in more but the slack, as ever, will be taken up by the NHS.

Five-star luxury palls. It is connection, purposefulness and tiny freedoms that matter

I visited the Humanitas home in the Netherlands last month, where students live rent-free in exchange for befriending elderly residents. It was the most uplifting thing I've done all year. A simple, genius idea that generated happiness in young and old. A while ago I visited the Hogewey dementia village near Amsterdam, where people live in households of likeminded souls — there's a home for artists, a working-class nana house filled with pottery windmills and an "upper-class" house where wine is served with dinner. The underlying principle is that dementia doesn't stop you being your true self.

Both times I was struck by the free-thinking Dutch, confronting decay and death with clear-eyed compassion. And also astounded that both projects had attracted interest from across the world, but not Britain. Why don't we care about social innovation? Was it the funding model? Every Dutch citizen pays into a national insurance pot designated for social care. Overall we pay similar tax rates to the Dutch, it is just that a fraction goes to the care budget. Clearly a massive sum needs to be funnelled from the NHS, which is already dealing with the non-medical needs of the old.

The problem isn't just cash, but lack of imagination. Nursing homes rated "outstanding" by the Care Quality Commission are usually expensive private ones like posh hotels. But five-

star luxury palls. It is connection, purposefulness and tiny freedoms that matter. It cost Humanitas nothing to welcome its students. In one US home every resident was given a parrot to care for; in Finland, a community library was relocated to a nursing home and run with great pride by residents; in France, a crèche takes up a home's ground floor and the elderly read to children.

Instead of a piddling under-secretary we need a minister for the elderly. There should be a rights of the old, as there is for children. The welfare state runs on the model that we will keel over at 65, so longevity, our greatest achievement, becomes a curse. As well as implementing the section of the 2014 Care Act that caps what a person will have to pay in their lifetime, the minister should champion creativity in care.

The ministry would be much mocked in our ageist culture. But it would be the most rewarding. The old teach us more about what it is to be human. My son and his girlfriend loved looking after my 92-year-old mother this week: they marvelled at how much pleasure she got just from choosing cheese. The Haringey carers who are suing agencies for making them work 24-hour shifts on half the minimum wage were asked why they didn't just leave: "Because it was so rewarding," one said. "We mattered."

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Leni Sep 18, 2016

Yes. The UK lacks innovation but is strangled instead by "commissioners" for care and data collectors whose job is to provide figures for politicians so they can reassure us about the excellence of our (cash strapped grudging) services, and then our (conservative) politicians can continue bribing us with lovely tax cuts, "because we are worth it".

At least we are "free" of old Europe with its social contracts, so we can keep our personal money and be like the USA....urgh. I am beginning to wish I lived across the channel....

Ellipse Sep 17, 2016

Those Haringey agencies must be shameless. It hasn't helped, countrywide, that the Tories have slashed Adult Social Care Services. Then they wonder why the NHS has to keep elderly people in hospitals. They simply cannot be allowed home.

ratterz Sep 17, 2016

Great article Janice.

I worry constantly about my future - I have no family to speak of and my partner has had cancer twice in the last 4 years. I have paid my taxes and NI for 40 years but would rather die than enter a 'care' home. There seems to be no middle ground - either they are homes for the well-off or council homes with no incentives for carers to do their very best. If they were modelled along the Dutch examples then I would be content. I despair of this country.

Foreversideways Sep 17, 2016

The biggest problem is a couple of decades down the line when those now giggling at the old are themselves old as they

unlike many old people today are making absolutely no provision for retirement let alone old age.

Arun Gordhandas Sep 17, 2016

Both my wife and I are 84 years old. Eleven years ago I suffered a stroke. She has looked after me without any help from an outside carer. Now I am independent to use a scooter. When she is not well I go out shopping and do some cooking to give her some well earned rest. We shall carry on as best as we can till the old reaper decides to visit us.

Alan Simpson Sep 17, 2016

@Arun Gordhandas You Sir, and your wife are an inspiration to all of us. I send you warmest good wishes.

Taciturnus Sep 17, 2016

We must stop believing that pickling our loved ones in formaldehyde and embalming them in residential uncaring homes when they are well past enjoying any pleasures from life is doing *them* a service. It is *ourselves* for whom we conduct this guilty love duty. Many of our loved ones would happily throw a Leaving The Planet party and either be cremated and turned into plant food, or ground up into cat food and canned and labeled with Auntie Maud's message to the world.....

And besides, we have to make room for the next lot on life's slippery ladder rungs.

Alan Simpson Sep 17, 2016

@Taciturnus And it was there ever thus and will continue to be until humankind eliminates its self on our mother planet.

Waldorf Sep 17, 2016

@taciturnus@ Alan Simpson. Both cats and plants are very sensitive and I doubt that either will respond in a positive way to the remains of the next lot. The current lot is an excellent vintage. Would you not agree Alan

Alan Simpson Sep 17, 2016

@Waldorf Sir, I couldn't agree more.

Alan Thorpe Sep 17, 2016

Wrong. We must stop believing that the state will provide.

Mrs Croc Sep 17, 2016

Well said! I have heard of the Dutch model, it sounds great. As for the students, well it's a win win. No accommodation fees for them and the elderly person gets to house share with help without having to give it up.

I'm Backing Britain Sep 17, 2016

A more basic question is should the duty of care for the elderly fall on the government or the family. It is a wonderful diversion to bemoan the lack of central funding, the mismanagement, the poor wages, the lack of allocated carer time, etc, so we don't have to address our own shortcomings - "should I spend more time with them, should I take them in,

should I visit more often and do some cleaning...". There are plenty of examples around the world of how to do it better, but should we rely on others to "find it rewarding" rather than ourselves? (I have been through this and have several friends in exactly the same position now).

Anna Tuckett Sep 17, 2016

Here in Britain we have a rather rose-tinted view of how other countries do it. First of all, in many countries the average life expectancy is not as high. Second of all, it falls to women - it is not men who do caring in those cultures, it is women, who are expected to do it on top of everything else. Do we really want that in Britain, seeing as women here still do the majority of caring? Before we start bemoaning our attitude, perhaps we should ask: why don't men do more?

Charles Pack Sep 17, 2016

Terrific article, Janice. Social minded, free thinking would surely help this sector to, financially, wash its face. Bed blocking in hospitals alone should encourage NHS funds to be allocated towards developing self serving models.

Come on Mr Hunt - Judi and I are here and waiting. Jeremy can be Chairman. No place for Mr Duck though!

Charlie

Nick Thornhill Sep 17, 2016

The problem is policy-makers are young. Researchers are young. They do not have a clue as to what it is like to suffer the gentle but sure decaying of the human body and mind. Worse, by saying that the few old people they research are actually quite fit and healthy, they legitimate their conclusion that to assume that older people could get ill is akin to ageism.

Why do we dead-head flowers after they have bloomed? To conserve energy for the plant. Can we do the same for human beings?

If not, I opt for dignity and forward planning by the not-so-elderly for when they get to be elderly.

<http://www.straitstimes.com/forum/letters-in-print/get-moving-on-helping-people-age-well>

SCN Sep 17, 2016

At last. The very first worthwhile Comment piece I have read since I subscribed to this newspaper.

I agree with the other commenter...it should have been on the front page. Your research is applauded!

Nigel Toye Sep 17, 2016

"With council budgets slashed"

That is the key issue. And hospital bed blocking results from a lack of social care. That causes more costs and problems. To spend money in the community would be a good investment. We all have to do more as well.

Ross Sep 17, 2016

@Nigel Toye

Councils waste money hand over fist, but cuts always fall where they will hurt people with little influence and no alternatives. Council budgets should be much more carefully scrutinised.

Hillcrest Northbeach Sep 17, 2016

@Nigel Toye It's just not true that council budgets have been slashed. Just last year the government found something like an

extra £3.5bn for 'social care' (which is what local govt calls elderly at-home care), and council spending power is flat in real terms over the course of this parliament.

The problem isn't simple to fix, or it really would have been fixed by now -- this isn't an issue which divides people in a party-political tribal sense. We are victims of lots of things -- our funding model obviously doesn't work (but we scream at any idea of contributory social insurance, a la the Dutch projects which Janice has written about); councils' priorities are not uniformly well managed (yes, there are great UK councils, but there are also really rubbish ones, and we don't seem able to energise local electorates to do much to fix it), and for some historical reason which I admit I'm not able to understand, the local NHS's won't work comfortably with local social services (so we end up with bed-blocking on the one hand, and people who require medical attention being shoved back into their homes on the other.)

The last point is the one which infuriates me. I don't understand why social services and health services can't work together. Everytime (any) government (I'm not making, for once, a pro-Tory or anti-L:abour point) tries to integrate the two systems, "something" happens to prevent it working. Yet there are obviously good-minded people who want the best for their citizens in both services. I think something radical and structural is required -- but of course that would set off a new bout of health union shroud-waving and strikes. It's not always irrational to feel a sense of despair.

Patrack Sep 17, 2016

Thank you Janice for this timely and insightful article. As my wife and myself prepare to celebrate our eightieth birthdays

we have a lot to be thankful for. We do think about the future but it is overwhelming at times if we try to anticipate every scenario. We manage well with the help of a wonderful career who is cheerful, very experienced and full of common sense, we realise that we are very fortunate in this respect. Equally her career depends on us for a constant income, but she will be retiring in the not too distant future.

Like many people live in a large house and have a modest income. We could invite young people to live with and do some caring in exchange for helping with some of our care needs. We could pay them at least a living wage rate for the work they do and they would have time for another job, study or training. They would need to have some training and an aptitude for this sort of work, but there is an enormous opportunity here so many people needing care and so many young people needing accommodation. Yes there a lot of issues to be resolved, but we are now thinking about it!

The Government can help by monitoring and supporting such schemes possibly with more generous equity release arrangements and tax relief.

This sort of scheme allows us to live at home which most of us want to do and it is cost effective compared to the so called care homes. We should make our houses work for us!

Freespirit Sep 17, 2016

How ironic that the humanist appear to be more Christian in their approach. Care packages through Hospitals and Social Services can cost up to a £1,000 a month and that is without any cleaning or hygiene in place - even cleaning toilets is out of their remit. Therefore, the very basic help has been withdrawn. The Dutch could certainly teach the British a thing or two. However, until - like you write - we

encompass getting old and ensure respect; there will always appear to be a disdain for anyone over sixty-fives.

Come and Go Sep 17, 2016

Some inventor will come up with a system that re-cycles urine into hard cash. (When, not if).

MKW Sep 17, 2016

@Come and Go Wee was useful in the making of gunpowder, but there's less call for that than there used to be.

odin Sep 17, 2016

I am 73 and in good health articles like this makes me desperately hope that if I become infirm or demented the law will be changed to allow me or my loved ones to opt to put me down like a worn out animal rather than suffer hideous indignities in a stinking old peoples home ,staffed by ill trained and badly paid carers ,as all governments seem determined not to fund care properly, why should any politician care, they ensure that they're all right Jack and Jacqueline with their generous taxpayer funded pensions.

Mr R A Adams Sep 17, 2016

@odin You say this -- and you mean it - but just wait. My experience is that most speak as you do, but as time goes by many elderly frail people treasure the increasingly limited elements of life that they retain; and so the decision (when is the time right to put you down, when has your life become unbearable) becomes an impossible one to make

S Girdwood Sep 17, 2016

Reading this was so so sad. But..... unfortunately true.
I have over the last two years, had first hand account of hospitals, care packages at home and eventually a 24/7 Care Centre.

This government haven't the faintest idea what goes on. It has all to do with statistics. Who gets priority, plus only an allocated time in A&E before they must be moved.

Then onto wards where staff are so overworked and stressed, running from one patient to another. Patients waiting for bed pans for so long, they wet the bed.

Then the care package at home, 30 mins max. What can be done in that short time.

Even in a 24/7 care centre, staff are still stressed, with duties over and above what they should do.

Then certain people wonder why you are against £50billion ++ been spent on HS2. MONEY THAT COULD BE SPENT ON NECESSITIES.

Chris P Duck Sep 17, 2016

Use your wealth to hire a cleaner. Replace the urine stained carpet.

First, the extended family has to do its work, rather than the state.

Ken Leyland Sep 17, 2016

@Chris P Duck

Yep - that's it sorted then!

princess w11 Sep 17, 2016

I want to know where is all the family support? Why do you expect the state to do everything for you in old age? Because

your family is too busy living their own lives. We need to prioritise elderly relatives like they do in other cultures

Robert Cannon Sep 17, 2016

@princess w11 I don't disagree but in mitigation women who do the lion's share of the caring are far more likely to be working full time than they used to be simply to fund the mortgage costs involved in buying a home or paying the inflated rents of 2016.

Anna Tuckett Sep 17, 2016

We might, providing men do their 50% share -at the moment, they don't. They certainly don't in those 'other cultures', where care for the elderly = unpaid female drudgery.

Judi Scott Williams Sep 17, 2016

Why is this article not front page news? Preferable, and much more important, than the odious, and yesterday man, Farage. I would be happy to begin a campaign as a 63 year-old closer to the age in question but who is currently still working and caring for grandchildren. Life is harder for our children than it ever was for us and we now have to help with childcare or they cannot work. If this pattern continues it will become more difficult for them to care for elderly relatives as well, in their turn, grandchildren

Colin Parker Sep 17, 2016

Thanks Janice. I am 75 and my wife is 70. We are both in good health but I do worry about what will happen to us in the years ahead.

Senior citizens, as Janice says, should be using their increasing numbers to demand change.

Alan Thorpe Sep 17, 2016

@Colin Parker That change being what exactly? The young paying more taxes to support the elderly who have failed to make provision for their old age. Janice is wrong, we all know we will get old and we expect the state to provide.

Stephen Williams Sep 17, 2016

This article should have taken over the front page today!

These folk were/are elated at saving 40p on a tin of baked beans yet face £600-£1300 pw in their dotage!

We depend on Governments to put markers down for safe, efficient, and fulsome services in the care for the elderly....and not just talk the talk ...and quietly thank themselves that they have manipulated equity in house prices as a cash cow to fund it!as more will be renting a time-bomb is approaching!

Mr James Smith Sep 17, 2016

I will always remember the sheer delight on my 89 year old father's face when we told him we could get his mobility scooter into the back of our estate car so he could go for a walk with us around a National Trust Garden. To him any loss of freedom was frightening.

But then he had witnessed my mother - to whom he was married for 60 years - spend her last four years in a home run by nuns, who incidentally seem not to have changed their

management style in the slightest, from when they scared the daylights out of me at primary school.

Prior to that, as her dementia worsened and her physical health failed, he cared for her 24x7 at home for three years.

He survived her for four years and made a great life for himself, getting active in the local church, and even fulfilling his long-held ambition of building a model railway in his study. Sadly he had a heart attack in his 89th year and six months later had to go into hospital.

Despite great care, he didn't get any better and after two home trials we realised he couldn't cope at home. On a Monday, after a great weekend celebrating his 90th Birthday in the hospital surrounded by friends and family, the doctor gave him the bad news in hospital.

Over the next three days he suffered several small strokes and on Thursday he passed away.

On being told the situation, my wife and I dropped everything and toured several homes and were horrified at what we saw, but finally settling on one run by an Irish lady who genuinely cared. As it happened he never got there, but died in the hospital at East Grinstead where they had cared for him wonderfully for the previous three months.

The doctor apologised to me saying he feared that the news of going to a home had been too much for him.

I'm not convinced was wrong.

Elizabeth Jane Mott Sep 17, 2016

Well said! My frail and elderly mother (now deceased) had many carers, of whom she could not speak highly enough, coming in 3 times a day. But their remit was limited - they could not clean, change bedding, shop or heat anything on the cooker. Yet they could use the microwave so my mother's diet was reduced to instant ready meals. Both her children live abroad, but the family were able to privately finance an additional carer prepared to do basic housework and shopping. This continued for 5 years before her death. Would she have died in utter squalor had we not been able to afford this? More likely she would have gone into a nursing home at great expense to us and the government - and the very last thing she wanted! A case for additional layer of care focused on the living conditions of the elderly rather than solely their personal health?

Waldorf Sep 17, 2016

Thank you Janice for bringing this so eloquently to the forefront of debate. It is nice to move into a more caring literary environment from the sneering "chuck them off the buses so that Julian can have a comfortable seat" way of thinking advocated by Matthew Parris.

Andrew Daws Sep 17, 2016

We are talking about a different group of wrinklies here. Those on the buses are not bed bound.

barbara stevens Sep 17, 2016

@Andrew Daws

But might eventually become bed bound.

Waldorf Sep 17, 2016

@andrew daws. I see you want to categorise wrinklies into two groups...or is there a third or fourth. Perhaps I should remind you we are talking about sensitive human beings.

Alan Simpson Sep 17, 2016

@Waldorf Well said Sir.

Sue of St James Sep 17, 2016

Excellent article.

Why are we baby boomers not planning for old age? As a society we need to talk about euthanasia, down sizing, relocating, becoming infirm etc etc. We might feel fit and well in our late 60s and 70s, but we need to face the reality that we are old and take charge of what is to become of us in our later years.

We agonise about what is the best nursery, play group, school etc for our children and yet we bury our heads in the sand and only take action when the inevitable accident, illness or decrepitude occurs to our elderly family members. Most of my friends acknowledge that they will have to move into more suitable accommodation than the family home at some point but few make the move when they are fit and able to do so. I think that we think that we are Peter Pan and that we have plenty of time. But, time flies.

barbara stevens Sep 17, 2016

@Sue of St James

Hitler was in favour of killing those he judged to be "unworthy of life".

I hope that never happens in Britain by people thinking the best way to solve a problem would be to use euthanasia on vulnerable people.

Alan Simpson Sep 17, 2016

This is certainly a major problem and one that worries me slightly as I'm nearing my three score and ten. Thankfully, I'm presently in robust health but that could change any moment. I'm filled with horror at the thought of the undignified times which may lie ahead. I would only have my dear wife to look after me but she too is of a similar age. With regards to that I wonder should more elderly be kept within the family fold, that is if there is family still around.

My wife and I lived in France for many years and of course we bought a house after viewing many properties. I noted that in many of the houses we visited during that phase had an elderly person sitting quietly by the fireside or in a cosy armchair. I commented to one estate agent that it was good to see the French had a culture of looking after their own elderly relatives but he put me right by saying many of those we saw would be in a home for the elderly except the families couldn't afford the financial burden.

I hope by the time the health of my wife and I begins to deteriorate things will have improved somewhat.