



Caged and Forgotten – older people’s letters to the editor about COVID-19

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News reports on the human impact of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that older people were the primary fatalities of the first wave. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) reported that 80 per cent of COVID-19 related deaths in Northern Ireland were among people aged 75 or over, and almost half were aged 85 or over (NISRA, 2020). Similar statistics are reported in the rest of UK and other ageing societies (Dunn et al., 2020). There are many reasons for this, not least that the UK, Canada and other countries with high death rates among people aged 80 or over are also countries with welfare and health systems robust enough to have achieved high life expectancies. For a more detailed review of the failings

of the UK government’s so-called ‘protective ring’ around care homes see Dunn et al. (2020) at The Health Foundation. Gray’s ARK feature on social care offers an analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland (Gray, 2020). This research update presents preliminary findings of a media analysis of vulnerable groups during the pandemic.

In his address to Parliament on 16 March 2020, Matt Hancock (Secretary of State for Health and Social Care) advised everyone to ‘Stay at Home’. In addition, he stipulated the special position of those deemed by Public Health experts to be ‘at risk’ saying... ‘This advice is directed at everyone, but it is especially important for the

over 70s, for pregnant women and for those with some health conditions. We will need to go even further to ensure that those with the most serious health conditions are largely shielded from social contact for around 12 weeks’ (Matt Hancock, address to House of Commons, 16 March 2020).

Given that so much time and space has been committed to speaking *about* older people during this crisis, for this Research Update we would like to give voice to older people’s own views on the pandemic. We have focused on views as they were expressed in letters to major UK national newspapers such as the Guardian, the Telegraph and the Times as well as tabloids such as MailOnline and The Express, and Sunday papers such as the Sunday Times.

Media reports

For our media analysis, we used the Nexis® database to search for newspaper articles which focused on the UK government’s decision to lockdown, and to place extra restrictions on people with underlying conditions and older people. In particular, we looked for articles explaining the reasoning behind these restrictions and also any letters that people sent into newspapers to complain or offer comments on these restrictions.

Older people wrote to national UK newspapers about the age-based lockdown in some numbers. The letters suggest that for those who fit the criteria for ‘at risk,’ such as anyone aged 70 or older, the kaleidoscope of messaging from government and experts was exhausting and frustrating. Letters expressing fear of contracting the ‘killer disease’ were absent. All of the fear reported related to the lockdown rules, fear of social isolation, the beginnings of a police state, and everyday frustrations such as trying to secure a delivery slot from major supermarkets. As the lockdown

Table 1: Examples of headlines to letters by older people to UK newspapers

Headline	Publication
'Missing my freedom'	Daily Mail (Glasgow), 24 April 2020
'Don't let older people's liberty be stolen during this crisis; Salley Vickers is horrified at the thought of being incarcerated for a year because of her age, Bob Wolfson considers the big picture, and Ashley Seager says the young have proved themselves to be the packhorse heroes of the pandemic'	The Guardian (London), 26 April 2020
'The Government should trust older people to make their own decisions'	Telegraph.co.uk, 29 April 2020
'Isolation is taking away all our reasons for living'	The Express (London), 1 May 2020
'Reaching 70 doesn't mean we're all decrepit'	Scottish Mail on Sunday, 3 May 2020
'Government is treating us like second-class citizens'	The Express (London), 5 May 2020
'This life is hardly worth living'	The Sunday Times (London) 10 May 2020
'Not for my sake'	Daily Mail (Glasgow), 16 June 2020

progressed, letters from healthy older people became more vehement that they would not be willing or able to stay socially isolated for the rest of year, as was suggested by some experts in April.

Using the search terms “over 70” OR “age” AND “lockdown” AND “letters” and a timeframe from 16 March to 15 August 2020 in Nexis we found a total of **46 letters** from those in the over 70 and shielding category. **Table 1** provides some of the papers’ headlines to give some insight into the opinions of those writing the letters.

Family relationships

Most of the letters were about older people’s position in families; how necessary they are to the functioning of family and society; and how younger people, particularly parents of young children, are dependent on them for childcare. Across the political spectrum, both right and left leaning publications such as the Telegraph and the Guardian had submissions from older people and their advocates making strong pleas for liberty. A letter by Salley Vickers to the Guardian on 26 April exclaimed: ‘Don’t let older people’s liberty be stolen by the crisis,’

and was supported by a number of letters from other older people. Hella Pick, from London, writes: “I live on my own. For me, the imposition of self-isolation for any length of time - in plain words, being caged in - would be tantamount to a living death.”

Hella is not alone. Another letter writer, Sally Phillips, draws a distinction between age and health, as highlighted in the box below.

“May I express solidarity with Salley Vickers? The idiocy of this random cut-off is even more evident if expressed as year of birth, rather than age. Let’s compare a non-smoker and moderate drinker, born November 1947, with an officially approved body mass index, a career record of useful contribution to society, who is doing pro bono work that is currently frozen, to an overweight individual, born June 1964, who’s never done a day’s useful work in his life and has been demonstrably reckless with his own health and that of others. Now let’s decide which is the better bet for early release.” (Sally Phillips, *The Guardian*, 29 April 2020)

As lockdown continued and the negative association between older

age, underlying conditions and COVID-19 became more apparent, there were calls for a more nuanced, stratified approach to age-based lockdown restrictions. An intervention from the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners in the first week of May 2020 was important as both organisations insisted that: “a person’s age should not determine whether they are at high risk or not. Under current NHS plans, those aged over 70 are deemed as being at high risk of contracting COVID-19. The two groups however have stated a blanket ban on any section of the population would be unacceptable” (Express Online, 2020).

There were also a series of interventions from Baroness Altmann, described as a ‘Tory Rebel’ and ‘advocate for older workers’, which was scathing of the government’s plans to confine over 70s to their homes. Both interventions earned supportive letters from older people. In the Express, these were reported as generationally divisive, citing Express readers such as Glenn Ashworth: “Funny how the older person is doing what they are asked and staying in yet get the blame... And what about the selfish, arrogant, ‘I can do what I want, you can’t stop me’ millennials.”

The Express was the only publication to engage in this kind of intergenerational baiting. In fact, most of the letters from older people were about their frustration at not being able to help younger generations. In an article headlined, ‘I miss the hugs’ Maxted (2020) cited a survey of 1,000 members of Gransnet claiming that half provide regular childcare within their families, saving the economy about £22.5bn per annum. The sentiment expressed in that article is reflected in a number of letters, written by grandparents, reporting that one of the most meaningful aspects of their lives, their role as a grandparent, had been lost to them. Their testimony reflects back on a point made by Salley Vickers in her April letter, that for many older people, the sense that the clock is ticking is very strong: “I would be willing to sign a declaration waiving my rights to a hospital bed

or a ventilator... For older people, to be summarily deprived without good reason of precious time spent in crucial family relationships, when their days are necessarily numbered, is cruel and I suspect and hope would be found illegal.”

Care homes

We were surprised that care homes and the vulnerability of older people in care homes to isolation and neglect as well as COVID-19 were barely present in the results of our search. However, the two references we found were telling. In a letter to the Guardian on 28 April 2020, Brian Parrott, a retired social worker with responsibility for older people’s services, expressed deep regret that, after years of arguing for funding to allow frail older people to be discharged from hospitals, when it finally happened, in the midst of the pandemic, the lack of a testing regime meant that both older people and their carers were left to die: “Come Covid-19, everything changes. Funding becomes instantly available. Everyone possible must be discharged as quickly as possible, with or without being tested for Covid-19 and the results known. Care homes are the obvious instant “solution”. So what happens? Discharged older people infect inadequately protected care home staff and existing residents. Both die. Was this not foreseeable? Did it not matter? Indeed, might it have been a policy consequence of a government interested only in avoiding NHS political embarrassment?”

Parrott’s letter echoes the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee’s damning review of successive governments’ failure to reform the social care sector: “Years of inattention, funding cuts and delayed reforms have been compounded by the Government’s slow, inconsistent and, at times, negligent approach to giving the sector the support it needed during the pandemic” (House of Commons, 2020, p. 3). The current UK government’s fascination with three word, simple messaging was also problematic, particularly when dealing with complex issues. The message to ‘Protect the NHS’ simply did not apply to those older people in the

hundreds of small, residential homes, staffed by under-paid workers and run by managers struggling to purchase Personal Protective Equipment. Suspended, as they were, outside the NHS, they were not protected. In fact, the opposite happened and they were actively exposed to additional vulnerabilities. As a result, many of them died (House of Commons, 2020).

On the issue of care home deaths, we find a strong personal account of the difficulties of diagnosis, even after death, given the extent of the pandemic and the government’s failure to get a working testing regime in place. Tony Parkinson, from Dorset, writes to the Telegraph on 1 May 2020 to report:

“My mother died last week in a care home at the age of 98. When my brother registered her death, as expected, the cause given was ‘frailty due to old age’, but he was surprised to see that the doctor certifying the death had added ‘presumed Covid-19’, an inclusion that also shocked the home’s manager. The day before our mother died, my brother was allowed to sit with her for an hour. His temperature was checked before he was admitted, but there was no form of isolation and none of the home’s staff were wearing personal protective equipment. If doctors are attributing all deaths in care homes to Covid-19, it makes a nonsense of any statistics and does great reputational damage to both individual care homes and to the care industry as a whole.” (Tony Parkinson, *The Telegraph*, 1 May 2020)

This letter demonstrates the difficult position that families, older people and their carers faced. It could also suggest that the emphasis on the ‘over 70s should stay at home’ worked to the detriment of people living in residential care who were actually the most clinically vulnerable. People in this group are often too frail or ill to speak for themselves. Arguably, their voices are completely absent from public debate. This relates to a point made by columnist, John Harris in the Guardian on 26 April. *Coronavirus has deepened prejudice against older people* is the only substantive article

we found which linked deaths in care homes to the status of older people in society. Harris connects the deaths in care homes to the sorry state of social care, which exists as a dysfunctional and disparate “archipelago of homes and so-called ‘providers’”. Harris’s reference to the convenient blaming of older people for the current plight of younger generations and the dangers of fuelling such age-based social division demonstrates a much-needed understanding of the complexity of life course transitions and the role of welfare in smoothing our path from birth to death (Spicker, 2010). As the global pandemic has revealed the harsh implications of inequalities in health, gender, age and ethnicity, it is worth taking the time to think about what the situation of older people in the pandemic can help us to learn about age discrimination and inequality.

Conclusion – what can we learn?

There are three key points to take away from the pandemic. First, older people are not all the same, and a policy that treats them as such is bound to fail. Gerontologists have long argued that policy-makers tend to ignore the diversity within the older population. Just because you are over 65, does not mean you lose all other social statuses and identities - ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation and living circumstances greatly affect a person’s experience of old age (Carney and Nash, 2020). Second, the pandemic lays bare the absence of older people’s voices from emergency situations. There is a need for older people to participate in shaping responses to, and recovery from, the pandemic in a way that recognises their human rights and dignity. Third, what happens in social care settings has huge implications for other healthcare sectors. Under-funding and ignoring social care has profound implications for the broader health of a nation. We desperately need a **new** system of social care which is not only properly funded, but is acutely focused on those in need, and aware of the massive inequalities within older birth cohorts. If we have learned anything from the COVID-19 pandemic, let it be this.

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Image: Maria Branyas, aged 113. Source: A. Kassam, ‘113-year-old coronavirus survivor: ‘The elderly are the forgotten ones of society,’ *The Observer*, 16 May 2020.

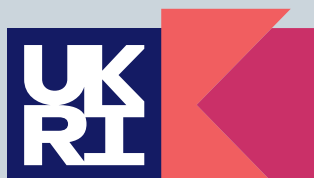
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