

Relational Care: the benefits and challenges for public policy

by **Jenny Kartupelis MBE**

The pandemic crisis has highlighted the tension between prevalent attitudes to older people: premature discharge to care homes may have led to many thousands of deaths, while society also demanded they 'shield' at home away from mainstream life and 'save granny'. Both approaches indicate a tendency to sideline the over-70s when it comes to collective responsibility, yet if older people fail to be seen as part of our social fabric, with little to offer, they are devalued along with those who devote their working time to older wellbeing.

There is however the option of a much more positive approach: that of 'relational care', which is not a one-way street where the recipient is disempowered and the giver exploited, but a paradigm where wellbeing and meaning in life are supported in networks of trust based on mutual knowledge and acceptance. My work over the last five years, interviewing some 150 older people and carers and investigating different care settings, has led to collated evidence about the nature of good practices that provide relational care, explored in a new publication (1).

Examining the evidence for beneficial change and listening directly to those involved define the critical factors in environments that foster trust, love, and autonomy; and enable older people to contribute to their communities. Fresh approaches such as introducing new types of support team, design adaptations, Montessori and intergenerational practices, technology innovations: all play a part.

The implications for practice are profound, but so also are the implications for national policy. The legacy of the Poor Law and the shadow of the workhouse still hang over engrained assumptions that must be openly addressed if resource is to be directed optimally, but it is greatly encouraging to see what happens when care homes and community projects (whether private or public) commit to a philosophy of hope.

Current UK policy presents two major challenges: silo working - particularly but not only the dislocation between health and personal care in terms of funding, provision and accountability

- and assumptions about the value of people (older citizens and the caring workforce) and their place in society. These assumptions cross the political divide because they arise from conflicted but embedded theories: the need for older 'disengagement' from work to make way for the next generation, and a demand for personal responsibility to age 'successfully' and make as few calls on the public purse as possible. This has resulted in 'allocation of resources in ways that assume a lesser priority for the needs of older people' (2).

Yet a relatively recent poll (3) indicated that government policy and public opinion may diverge in this respect; there appears to be increasing public support for higher national taxation to maintain and improve not only health, but also social care, with 62% of respondents (up from 51% in 2018) supporting this.

These current times of great change offer an opportunity to raise radical questions about the nature of care: there are inspiring examples of what can be achieved with relational care but also challenges for re-envisioned policy.

Jenny Kartupelis started her career in public relations; in 1998, while still running her own PR business, she was invited by faith leaders to help establish a regional multi faith body and for her work as its director, she was awarded the MBE for services to interfaith relations. Since 2015, Jenny has given much of her time to research into, and reporting on care of older people, being given access to visit and interview in a wide variety of charitable, private and Local Authority care settings. Her work has resulted in two books about the theory and practice of relational care.

References:

- (1) Making Relational Care Work for Older People: Exploring innovation and practice in everyday life (Kartupelis, J, 2021, Routledge, London and New York) is available to readers at a discounted price from www.routledge.com using the code FLR40 at checkout
- (2) Re-imagining Old Age: Wellbeing, care and participation (Barnes et al., 2018, Vernon Press, Wilmington)
- (3) Poll for the Health Foundation conducted by Ipsos MORI, press release summarising results dated 5 December 2019.

