

In the News:

Hi, I am Keith Albans, Acting Chair of Christians on Ageing. Here is my look back at some of stories which have made the news during the month of February and which seem relevant to the concerns of our members. Wherever possible I have included links to the original stories which will hopefully give you more information. As always, the comments on the stories are my own and will not necessarily reflect the views of CoA or its members.

1. Ageism

The Centre for Ageing Better continues to campaign against ageism in all its many forms, but it will surprise few of us to read of those who oppose or challenge them. The charity has urged the public to challenge people who use 'patronising or belittling terms,' and suggests that other phrases such as "I'm too old for this" and talking about having "a senior moment" should be dropped because they risk becoming self-fulfilling prophecies.

Among those questioning the campaign, which includes an online quiz 'Are you Ageist?' was Dame Esther Rantzen who suggested that the quiz risks belittling the issue and trivialising the very real problem of ageism.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/02/18/calling-older-people-sweet-kind-damaging-esther-rantzen/>

The charity's claim that ageism is an issue which hides in plain sight within our societies may seek justification in the debates around the ages of the likely candidates in this year's US Presidential election. In particular, the age of President Biden (81) has become a matter of concern to some within the Democratic party.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2024/02/18/democrat-plot-replace-joe-biden-us-election-age-trump/>

During the Covid-19 pandemic there were many who suggested that there was a lot of ageist attitudes in how older people were dealt with. Adrian Chiles recently found himself in A&E with his father who had had a fall, and in this article he reflects on whether those same attitudes are persisting.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/31/what-i-learned-from-a-freezing-night-in-ae-with-my-dad>

2. Health and Social Care

As winter pressures on the NHS give way to spring pressures, evidence of changed practices continues to emerge. In this article the role of so-called 'virtual wards,' where patients are monitored remotely at home is explored. Such 'wards' provide hospital-level care in people's homes through the use of apps, wearables and daily "virtual ward rounds" by medical staff, who review patient data and follow up with telephone calls or home visits where necessary. More than 10,000 such beds are already available across England and at least a further 15,000 are planned. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also funding their expansion. The article also includes a link to a previous contribution from Brian Bostock who helped to set up such a 'ward' back in 2012.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/07/how-virtual-nhs-wards-now-reality>

A year before that initiative, Andrew Dilnott published the recommendations of his commission's investigation into addressing the crisis in Adult Social Care. Amongst his proposals was a cap of £35,000 on lifetime individual liability for care costs, but successive governments have failed to implement this. In a recent article in the Observer, Dilnott has called on both main political parties ahead of the General Election to "grow up and end an irresponsible refusal to talk about solving England's social care crisis. Time will tell whether anyone is listening!"

Another aspect of the 'social care crisis' is linked to the growing realisation that over the next few years almost half of English councils face bankruptcy, with the finger being pointed at the costs of supporting a growing older population as one of the contributing factors. The cross-party levelling up, housing and communities committee called for Ministers to "urgently inject £4bn into English town hall budgets to head off an 'out of control' financial crisis that threatens to drag well-run councils into bankruptcy and put local services at risk."

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/feb/01/english-councils-need-4bn-to-prevent-widespread-bankruptcy-mps-say>

3. Assisted Dying

Once again this issue has been in the news during the past month, with two particular contributions worth noting. Firstly a parliamentary inquiry has reported that there is a real possibility that the law may change within some of the devolved jurisdictions such as Scotland, Jersey and the Isle of Man. As well as drawing attention to this conundrum the report also calls on the government to commit to increased financial support for hospices and "ensure universal coverage of palliative and end-of-life services." The report itself remains neutral on the question of assisted dying which it describes as a "difficult, sensitive and yet crucial subject."

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/29/assisted-dying-law-may-soon-diverge-across-british-isles-mps-warn>

The other contribution came from Jonathan Dimbleby, a long-term campaigner for a change in the law, who has criticised the current law following the death of his younger brother, Nicholas, a celebrated sculptor who had lived with Motor Neurone disease.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/27/increasingly-unbearable-jonathan-dimbleby-criticises-uk-law-against-assisted-dying>

4. Dementia

Further news has emerged on the possible development of a blood test which may be able to predict the onset of dementia 10-15 years in advance of symptoms presenting themselves. Analysis of the blood identified patterns of four proteins that predicted the onset of dementia in general, and Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia specifically, in older age. When combined with more conventional risk factors such as age, sex, education and genetic susceptibility, the protein profiles allowed researchers to predict dementia with an estimated 90% accuracy nearly 15 years before people received clinical confirmation of the disease.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/12/early-blood-test-to-predict-dementia-is-step-closer-as-biological-markers-identified>

Responding to the latest results, Dr Sheona Scales, the director of research at Alzheimer's Research UK, said: "This new study adds to the growing body of evidence that looking at levels of certain proteins in the blood of healthy people could accurately predict dementia before symptoms develop."

Meanwhile, the same charity has suggested to the BBC's Panorama programme that the NHS is poorly prepared to roll out two new drugs which slow down the deadly stages of the disease.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68231631>

Research to develop new drug treatments takes place alongside those looking for positive effects from existing medicines used for treating other conditions. So it has been announced that Viagra may help to lower the risk of Alzheimer's disease, with men who were prescribed it or similar medications being 18% less likely to develop the most common form of dementia years later than those who went without the drugs.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/07/viagra-may-help-to-lower-the-risk-of-alzheimers-disease-study-finds>

5. Being Older

The subject of the State Pension and the age at which it is paid is rarely far from the headlines. The current plan is for the State Pension age to increase to 67 in April 2026, with further increases in the pipeline. While the economic argument may suggest such increases are inevitable, the counter argument explores issues of health and poverty, and also reminds us that the effect of increasing the state pension age disproportionately affects poorer members of society.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/06/the-guardian-view-on-the-state-pension-age-mindlessly-hiking-it-is-not-the-answer>

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2024/feb/09/raising-uk-state-pension-age>

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2024/feb/12/to-fix-the-pensions-crisis-we-must-first-reduce-poverty>

Another story focussing on the older members of society suggests that Pensioners could have their bank accounts inspected by the Government under new powers being considered to thwart benefit fraud. The suggestion is that, as part of the data protection and information bill, banks will hand over information to the Department for Work and Pensions if there is evidence that a claimant does not meet the criteria for the benefit they are claiming.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/banking/millions-pensioners-face-bank-account-inspections-fraud/>

A potentially more encouraging story comes from the holiday firm EasyJet, who are planning to make it easier for grandparents to travel with their families. Under the offer, one grandparent on the trip can travel free of charge to countries including Spain, Greece and Italy. The tour operator said it hoped the deal would encourage Britons to take a holiday with three generations of their family or more.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/feb/01/easyjet-announces-grans-go-free-deal-on-holidays-to-europe>

6. And finally...

There were a few stories this month which defy categorisation, but which may be of interest. After talk of retirement age, it was interesting to note that Neil Warnock at the age of 75 has taken charge of Aberdeen FC – his 17th club as a manager!

<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2024/feb/05/neil-warnock-aberdeen-manager-aged-75-end-of-season>

For those who prefer cricket, and in the 60th anniversary year of Geoff Boycott's test debut, the suggestion that the future of test cricket may be in doubt strikes a note of alarm!

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/05/the-guardian-view-on-test-cricket-the-ultimate-version-of-the-game-is-in-doubt>

For those of us of a certain age, reminders of TV days gone by may be tinged with sadness, as with the recent death of the final member of the Dad's Army mainstays, Ian Lavender.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/feb/05/dads-army-actor-ian-lavender-dies-aged-77>

Somewhat happier are the memories of Bagpuss – who many of us first saw in black and white, and therefore had no idea just what colour the creature was!

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/feb/12/how-we-made-bagpuss-meccano-cameras-clanger-pink-cat>

It is said that if you can remember the 1960's you weren't there. Well one person who was is Malcom Muggeridge, and in this archive article he sums the decade up for all of us.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/11/from-the-observer-archive-malcolm-muggeridge-sums-up-the-1960s-in-1969>