

Letters to the Editor

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Far from being a burden on society, many elderly people make a hidden contribution to British life

SIR – Andrew Dilnot's Commission on Funding of Care and Support (report, July 5) comes out in favour of the state assisting the elderly if they need care in their last years and I am delighted at this. But I despair of the way the elderly are portrayed as a burden on society.

I am a solicitor who specialises in advising the elderly. I am 62, and I resent the way I am seen. I work in a well-paid job, run my own business, and pay taxes. I do volunteer work. I am not alone in this: I know many people 10 or 20 years older than I am who remain active in society.

Indeed, anybody with little more than the basic state pension continues to pay income tax, even when they go into care, if they sell their homes and have capital from which the fees are paid.

What is not highlighted about those who are classed as "elderly" is that most are active until the last few years of their lives, as is made clear in the report. Moreover, they give value for money by providing free child care to grandchildren, are often carers themselves for spouses or other

relatives, and keep an eye on frail neighbours. When the time comes for these old people to need care, it is often at the end of their lives.

The average length of stay in a care home, again mentioned in the report, is now under two years – it used to be more than three. Although that care can be expensive, it is not for long.

The Dilnot report does mention the hidden contribution of unpaid family carers. I would like to see statistics showing the contribution made by fit and active old people who are carers themselves. Then the population would see the facts in perspective, instead of castigating one section of society because the cost of their care is expensive.

No one knows who will need this care; some never do, others need it for years. It is a lottery, but as a caring society we should accept that nobody should have to worry about how their care is going to be met when they are most vulnerable.

Jennifer Margrave
Guildford, Surrey

SIR – Care for old people at home can be dire, and it is encouraging to know that Parliament is seeking to address this.

From the experience of a sick friend living in London, I can say that, in some instances, the compassion and reliability of daily carers need to improve drastically, as does their training. Recruiting people of good character and giving them sufficient training costs money.

Jane Martin
Saffron Walden, Essex

SIR – We should acknowledge that a combination of long and regular work, generous company pensions and capital gains from property booms means that, contrary to tabloid myth, not all pensioners are on the breadline.

The Government should tax such benefits as winter fuel allowance and remove age-related tax allowances. This would simplify the tax system and generate revenue from those who can afford it.

Graham Hoyle
Shipley, West Yorkshire

SIR – There is no dilemma about paying for care. If an individual has assets, he should use them. Children bleating about losing inheritances should explain why the state should pay to care for their parents when they can't be bothered to.

State-funded care should be a safety net, not a luxury quilt for greedy children.

Jayne Lindley
Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

SIR – The cost of Mr Dilnot's proposals is estimated to be £1.7 billion a year while, as you report (July 4), civil servants' pensions are costing the nation £7.4 billion annually. Mr Dilnot's plan would cost only 0.25 per cent of a total public spending bill rising past £700 billion, so it is simply a matter of priorities.

A civilised nation is judged on how it looks after its elderly. All this needs is leadership and the willingness to look beyond the next general election. Not too much to ask of folk in Westminster, surely?

Mike Davison
Holywell, Cambridgeshire