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How coronavirus exposed our society's inherent ageism

The crisis has laid bare society's dismissive attitude towards the over-60s, but their role has always been important.

BY VITTORIO BUFACCHI

Everyone is vulnerable to Covid-19, but some are more vulnerable than others. The older you are the greater the risk. And currently, people over-65 account for 90 per cent of coronavirus-related deaths. This fact forces us, as a society, to reflect on the meaning and value of old age and the ethical dilemmas the pandemic is forcing us to face.

In Northern Italy, doctors and nurses were given instructions to follow when making decisions of life and death. These included considering the age of the patients before allocating ventilators. As the guidelines say: "It may become necessary to establish an age limit for access to intensive care."

Government policy in the UK took a more sinister turn. At the end of February, Dominic Cummings allegedly said the government's strategy could be summarised in the following terms: "Herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad." The implication seems to be that our elders are a liability and therefore it's OK to sacrifice them for the sake of the stock market.

Although Downing Street quickly rejected these allegations, Cummings' purported comments about pensioners and the economy reflect a distinction between young and old that permeates our society. Specifically, we tend to draw the line between young and old when a person retires and is no longer deemed productive. In fact, the link between old age and a lack

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of productivity is so strong it appears in the way we speak of retirees as "over the hill" or "past their sell-by date".

The backlash against this alleged leak from Downing Street does, however, suggest an alternative account of old age: one which sees our seniors as a benefit to society, not a burden. To tease out this alternative view, it is worth turning to Cicero's spirited defence of old age in which he claims it is a profound mistake to overlook the contribution our elders make to our communities.

In *Cato the Elder on Old Age*, Cicero acknowledges the decline in sexual and physical productivity that comes with old age. Sexually speaking, menopause and a flattening of the male libido mean we are either unable or very unlikely to produce children who will grow up to be productive members of society. And physically, when we are 60 we generally do not have the same strength and agility to chop down a tree as we did at the age of 20.

While Cicero is quick to point out that age-induced sterility is not the end of all sexual activity, he is particularly keen to highlight the productive contributions elders make to families. A couple in their sixties can no longer have kids, but they often play a key role in caring for and supporting their children and grandchildren. And although familial bonds can be rather complicated, the friendship shared between different generations of a family is priceless.

Cicero also believes the decline in sexual desire we experience as we get older is a good thing, because it frees us from some overpowering passions. "I have known many old men," Cicero writes, "who had no complaints about their age or its liberating release from physical pleasure." Here the idea is that sexual desire obstructs our ability to reason and blinds our intelligence to the point at which "a good life becomes impossible".

This emphasis on reason and intelligence indicates the limit of physical prowess and brings us to the greatest contribution our elders have to offer. Cicero notes: "Every stage of life has its own characteristics: boys are feeble, youths in their prime are aggressive, middle-aged men are dignified, and old people are mature."

He then goes on to say that "great deeds are not done by strength or speed or physique: they are the products of thought, and character, and judgment. And far from diminishing, such qualities actually increase with age."

With their wisdom and experience, our elders are in a position to offer sound advice and help us through all kinds of crises. They are also the guardians of historical living memory, the gate-keepers of our by-gone personal identity, and our unique living connection to the past. And while they may lack certain forms of sexual or physical productivity, Cicero believes our seniors' foresight and understanding enable them to make *essential* contributions to our society.

As we try to come to terms with the most devastating public health crisis in a century, the meaning and value of our elders' wisdom and experience is on full display. Many older doctors are putting their own lives at risk by giving up the comfort of their retirement, putting on the scrubs and joining in the herculean effort to save lives in hospitals around the world.

At the same time, many of us living in lockdown are enjoying the fruits of the labour of people in old age, reading novels by Margaret Atwood or John le Carré, watching Patrick Stewart or Judy Dench on the small screen, or listening to the Rolling Stones performing via Zoom as part of the One World: Together at Home concert.

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Given the contributions our elders make to our family, intellectual and cultural lives, it is foolish and crass to treat them as a liability that can be sacrificed for the sake of the economy. The fact that the UK government omits coronavirus deaths in care homes and only reports fatalities in hospitals is a deceitful way to massage the numbers to make things look less disastrous than they are. And it is frankly appalling that the deaths of thousands of senior citizens *literally* do not count.

Judging by the way most countries prepared for the pandemic, it is clear that protecting the elderly was not a priority. Yet after we have put this outbreak behind us, everything ought to be different. Our elders may be at greater risk to the threat posed by coronavirus, but they are precious and still have a lot to offer beyond the confines of the labour market.

As Cicero said: "To be respected is the crowning glory of old age." Sadly, this pandemic has exposed the lack of respect our market-obsessed society has for people in old age.

Vittorio Bufacchi is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at University College Cork, Ireland. He is the author of Violence and Social Justice and he tweets @BufacchiV. This article is part of the Agora series, a collaboration between the New Statesman and Aaron James Wendland, Professor of Philosophy at the Higher School of Economics. He tweets @ajwendland



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