CULTURE SHIFT ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS ELDERLY MUST COME FROM THE TOP, SAYS RNHA

A cultural shift in the attitude of society at large towards older people is essential if older people are to receive the level of help and support they deserve, according to the Registered Nursing Home Association (RNHA).

Responding to last week’s report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights about older people, the RNHA said the fact that so many of the country’s senior citizens had to pay for all or most of their own care out of their own pockets spoke volumes about the priority accorded to them by successive governments.

To ensure that older people are treated generally with more consideration and respect, the government needs to take a lead by allocating the resources needed by this group of the population, the RNHA claimed.

Commented RNHA chief executive officer Frank Ursell: “The Human Rights Committee called in its report for a change in culture as far as this country’s approach to older people is concerned. That change must be led from the very top. As a human being, an older person is just as precious as anyone else. Yet this is not reflected in the priority accorded by many public bodies to meeting their needs.

“If we are talking about individuals' human rights, surely an older person should expect to have the same access to healthcare as people of all other ages. Yet we know from figures published recently by the Department of Health that an older person’s ability to obtain NHS continuing care funding depends very much on where they live and on the attitude of their local primary care trust. Sorting out this lottery would be a very good starting point for the assertion of human rights for the elderly.”

The RNHA is as keen as the Human Rights Committee to stamp out bad practice in the care and treatment of older people in hospitals and care homes.

Said Mr Ursell: “In its report, the committee recognised that there is far more good practice than bad, with many care homes providing very good or excellent services. Unfortunately, this balanced acknowledgement of the reality on the ground was not generally reflected in the subsequent media coverage and commentary on the report, which has tended to highlight the negatives and has focused on bashing care homes in particular.
“This sensationalising approach causes unnecessary distress to care home patients and their relatives, as well as to those who are about to make the decision about whether to move into a care home.”

He added: “The committee wants to see older people in care homes having a basic human right to good quality care, including being treated with dignity and respect. As an association representing over 1,200 nursing homes, we support this principle. Patients should have the right to expect sensitive and appropriate care.

“We in the nursing home sector believe that all of these rights are enshrined in the Care Standards Act and its associated regulations, giving the sort of protection intended in the Human Rights Act, with the exception of security of tenure.

“If this one aspect of the Human Rights Act were to be applied in future to care homes, the government would need to ensure that the vast majority of residents were not obliged to endure problems caused by overly disruptive individuals whose behaviour makes their lives a misery.”

The RNHA intends to write to the government to ensure that such practical considerations are taken fully into account in any future changes to legislation or regulations.

The RNHA will also be asking the Human Rights Committee, in any of its future deliberations on older people, to hear evidence from the independent sector’s care associations. More than two thirds of all older people in care are looked after in independent care homes.

“It is surprising that the committee did not see fit to invite us, as the bodies representing thousands of providers of care to older people, to present information based on our practical experience and expertise,” said Mr Ursell. “We hope very much that this omission will be rectified in the future and that we shall have the opportunity to enter into a productive dialogue with members of the committee.”

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