



AGEISM IS KILLING OLDER ADULTS

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Ageism has been defined as “the stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age. Ageism can take many forms, including prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory practices, or institutional policies and practices that perpetuate stereotypical beliefs.”(World Health Organization, 2021). In practice prejudicial attitudes that can include isolating, ignoring, infantilizing, patronizing, and in severe cases abusing or neglecting older people can be seen on an almost daily basis in public life.

One such ageist belief is that old people need institutions once they become frail and in need of care. This has led to tens of thousands of old people being warehoused in dangerous, dehumanizing facilities. Yet the call continues to go up – not to get them out into comfortable, safe, community residences that are smaller and more home-like, but to put even more staff into institutions!

On its face this makes no sense because it exposes even more people to infection as more staff either bring it into a large facility or become infected there and take it back to the community.

Nevertheless, in spite of knowing that Ontario has no financial safeguards to ensure that any new money would even go to staffing, in spite of calling for more staff means that corporate-owned facilities with terrible track records will get even more money for which they don't have to be accountable, and even though calls to put more money into institutions will only maintain and further support the unsustainable institutional system that keeps older adults trapped there, the focus remains on staffing and wages, not on the people in the beds who need to be rescued.

This is ageism at its worst, where the needs of those who care for older adults trump the needs of older adults themselves.

Ignoring Seniors' Calls For Help To Stay Home And Out Of Institutions

Over 91% of older adults have said they want to stay at home and do not want to enter an institution (Home Care Ontario, 2020). Who is listening? Not government. One Ontario government after another kept adding institutional beds to the province's already high rate of institutionalization.

Not the unions that want to keep union jobs in long term care institutions at the expense of continued warehousing of old people there.

Not some academics more concerned about unionized workers than the old people living and dying in those beds.

When seniors' voices are raised through groups like Seniors for Social Action Ontario calling for in-home and residential alternatives to these dangerous institutions, our voices are quickly drowned out by the louder voices supporting more staff for the institutions and higher wages for them.

Genocide Against Elders

The fact that the Ford government has been willing to stand by as elders die in the thousands in these institutions...the fact that police have refused to investigate what are clearly criminal acts documented in the military reports....the fact that people still believe institutions are the only answer as people age and develop care needs...all point to the underlying ageist attitudes in society itself.

Vulnerability to being institutionalized and dying in a long term care institution rises with age, being a woman, living alone, and having poor health status including dementia (Huyer et al, 2020).

One thing this pandemic has demonstrated is that once an older person enters an institution they have no rights and they will be left to die of COVID, dehydration, and malnutrition, and nothing will be done to stop it.

Whole groups of people left to die in the thousands of sickness, starvation, and disease can be seen as genocide by neglect.

Calls To Staff Up Rather Than Get Elders Out

We have now seen the tragic results of calls to keep throwing more money at corporate controlled long term care facilities and companies to "staff up". A teenager has joined the 14 dead residents at Roberta Care (Lamberink, 2021). Many concerns have been raised about his tragic death. But we do not even know who the 14 older adults who died in that same facility are, do we?

Frightened and grieving families have, meanwhile, been recruited to add their voices to the call for more staffing by the Ontario Health Coalition (OHC, 2021).

Not a word about getting people out of these facilities, only of calling for a staffing drive, the military in, and more enforcement (OHC, 2021) which the government has shown itself incapable of achieving in the absence of alternative community residences that would allow them to revoke nursing home licenses.

Ageism – at its worst.

Lack of In-Home and Community Care Is Ageism

Government has historically not responded to older people's calls to be able to stay home should they develop health problems or disabilities. The province's home care system continues to be a shambles of poorly coordinated and unreliable care with a laughably small number of home care hours available to those who need assistance. It has never been an alternative to being placed in an institution. Canada has been an "outlier" in its expenditures for community care.

“The 1.3 percent of GDP Canada now allocates to LTC falls well short of the OECD average of 1.7 percent. Worse, our spending relative to GDP has barely increased despite the surge in the number of seniors. Worse still, the measly 0.2 percent of GDP Canada spends on home care is one of the lowest allocations to home care in the OECD. And even worse than that, the ratio of more than 6 dollars spent on institutional care for every dollar spent on home care is one of the most imbalanced resource allocations in the developed world” (Drummond, Sinclair, Bergen, 2020).

Nor have there been small, community-based, group homes for older adults who may require residential care that have been available to literally every other age group, so that they can at least remain in their own communities in a home-like setting. These are considered to be much more hospitable for people with dementia. Hospice spaces have always been hard come by for those with terminal illnesses.

Is it any wonder that older adults live in fear as they get older? They are terrified that they will be put away somewhere and mostly forgotten, subjected to unjustifiable institutionalization in the absence of humane and respectful alternatives that would allow them to stay home or live in their own communities.

Unjustifiable Institutionalization

In 2003 the National Council on Disability in the United States, in examining the impact of federal laws, policies, programs and initiatives on people with disabilities issued a report entitled reclaiming institutionalized lives. The report referred to unjustifiable institutionalization of people with disabilities, and actions were taken by governments in the wake of that report to end the practice of placing people with disabilities in facilities (National Council on Disability, 2003).

In Ontario, the last of the large institutions for people with developmental disabilities were closed and a Premier apologized for the inhumane treatment people had endured in these facilities. Yet people with developmental disabilities, even young people, were forced into nursing homes amidst press and public outcry.

Institutions are not good places for people to live, and yet in Ontario we force 78,000 people into over 600 of them because of a lack of choice. The psychological impact for older adults is devastating. They fear getting older and being put away.

In spite of decades of documentation of conditions by one advocacy group after another as well as press reports detailing the horrendous conditions in many of these institutions, including front page series in the Toronto Star and documentaries by other news outlets, nothing has changed.

Ageism is so entrenched in Ontario, that it took a military report also detailing these conditions to get the attention of the Premier. And still, nothing has changed.

The cap on home care hours has not been removed in order to allow people to remain in their own homes.

Public funds have been offered to long term care institutions to add air conditioning in spite of reports by The Star that three of the large companies some of whose facilities had no air conditioning were paying their shareholders and senior executives significant returns (Wallace et al, 2020). Meanwhile facilities were understaffed, short supplies, and people were dying of COVID and malnutrition and dehydration.

More institutional beds are also being added by the Ford government leading to the “placing” of even more older adults as community alternatives to these institutions are once again not being developed (Ministries of Health and Long Term Care, 2020). More beds in institutions. This is what passes for 21st Century long term care policy in Ontario.

The pervasive ageism in government policy will continue to drive these dangerous and destructive policies, and old people will continue to be abused, neglected, and die in these institutions. It is ageist policies and practices like this that are literally killing them.

Many older adults suffer depression and anxiety for fear of being abandoned, isolated, and institutionalized. They do not fear death. They fear what is likely to happen to them before they die. And that needs to change.

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