'Where there is no honour for the elderly, there is no future for the young'

One of the key lessons of the pandemic is that we should rethink how we treat older people and learn to value them, **writes Shelagh Fogarty**

YOUNG, OLDER, elderly. Three words but a world of difference, depending on where you land. As the unspeakable and continuing horror of avoidable deaths from the coronavirus unfolds in our care homes, the early weeks of the UK response to Covid-19 should be looked back on as the midwife of a national revelation about old people.

Old people.

I repeat the term because in recent years we've become accustomed to describing old people in ways which soften the facts, diminish our responsibility and blur the reality that being old means being physically weaker and, in any number of ways, more vulnerable. Old people are a gift too, of course, and I'll come to that, but the dark stuff first.

Has there been a moment in the century or more of functioning public health in the UK when, knowing who the vulnerable were, we acted explicitly to make them *more* vulnerable?

THE SLOW dawning of what coronavirus meant for us all has been a very personal as well as communal experience. We've all had some variation on jobs, kids, commutes, relatives to take into account. What we all knew from the start, though, was that this new and sometimes deadly virus was most threatening to old people.

Old people.

The old person I was most concerned with is my mother. At 89 years old and with multiple vulnerabilities, she was always going to need shielding from Covid-19's worst excesses. Staying with her in her home during the lockdown it was immediately obvious to me that, despite being part of a large family and engaging outside carers a few hours a week, we needed to dramatically shrink the human DNA in the house.

Emotionally tough though it is, controlling who gets to touch or be near our mother is the only way we can keep her safe. The fewer hands, the better. She is one woman in her own home. There are 15,000 care homes in England, compared with 200 hospital trusts. We all know our local hospitals, but how many of us know our nearest care home? The private structures of the residential care sector and its semi-detached status from public life and public health is a faultline that needs fixing.

FAMILIES WERE asked to stay away from care homes and not see much-loved parents for months, but all the while, in a sector characterised by huge staff shortages, agency workers were moving between care homes, sometimes bringing the deadly virus with them, while elderly people suffering from coronavirus were discharged from hospital back to those homes, doing the same. Both of these things were done in the full knowledge that old people are catnip to this virus. Why?

Because the NHS is embedded in the public consciousness in a way care homes and the care sector generally is not. Because somehow, even as the size of our ageing population swells and one day soon will include you, the lives of our elders were happening off-stage, unseen. And when the great winnowing came, courtesy of coronavirus, we might have missed it, but for a few persistent voices.

I doubt Pope Francis intended to be quite so prophetic when – long before Covid-19 came – he said: "In a civilisation in which there is no room for the elderly or where they are thrown away because they create problems, this society carries with it the virus of death ... Where there is no honour for the elderly, there is no future for the young."

I give the last word to the journalist Ian Birrell: "There was nothing inevitable about so many deaths in care homes. It is down to incompetence and a shamefully slow response. But it is also down to structural flaws in the way our society treats older and disabled people."

Honour the old. Save the young.

Shelagh Fogarty is a radio and television presenter and journalist.