

This is the eighth piece written by Rebecca Lloyd of the Irish Hospice Foundation as part of the rollout of the People's Charter on Dying, Death and Bereavement in Ireland. Each article in the series concentrates on a line of the Charter and attempts to discuss how it affects us in our daily lives. The focus of this article is based around the line: 'My dignity is respected and maintained to the end of my life, and after my death.'



Every so often I think about a poem that, on first reading, has changed the person I am. This poem profoundly resonated with me, pricked my eyes with tears and made me feel useless. Because this poem gets it. It hits you square between the eyes and it hurts. There is truth in there. And the truth is this: sometimes we fail to see the person and what made them who they are. Not the disease or condition, not the age, not the colour, not the religion, not the label - just them.

An Old Lady's Poem

What do you see, nurses, what do you see?
What are you thinking when you're looking at me?
A crabby old woman, not very wise,
Uncertain of habit, with faraway eyes?
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply
When you say in a loud voice, "I do wish you'd try!"
Who seems not to notice the things that you do,
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe.....
Who, resisting or not, lets you do as you will,
With bathing and feeding, the long day to fill....
Is that what you're thinking? Is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse; you're not looking at me.

I'll tell you who I am as I sit here so still,
As I do at your bidding, as I eat at your will.
I'm a small child of ten ...with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters, who love one another.
A young girl of sixteen, with wings on her feet,
Dreaming that soon now a lover she'll meet.
A bride soon at twenty -- my heart gives a leap,
Remembering the vows that I promised to keep.
At twenty-five now, I have young of my own,
Who need me to guide and a secure happy home.
A woman of thirty, my young now grown fast,
Bound to each other with ties that should last.
At forty, my young sons have grown and are gone,

But my man's beside me to see I don't mourn.
At fifty once more, babies play round my knee,
Again we know children, my loved one and me.
Dark days are upon me, my husband is dead;
I look at the future, I shudder with dread.
For my young are all rearing young of their own,
And I think of the years and the love that I've known.

I'm now an old woman ...and nature is cruel;
'Tis jest to make old age look like a fool.
The body, it crumbles, grace and vigour depart,
There is now a stone where I once had a heart.
But inside this old carcass a young girl still dwells,
And now and again my battered heart swells.
I remember the joys, I remember the pain,
And I'm loving and living life over again.
I think of the yearsall too few, gone too fast,
And accept the stark fact that nothing can last.

So open your eyes, nurses, open and see,
...Not a crabby old woman; look closer ...see ME!!

This poem made me think.

It made me think, we need to look beyond the obvious. We cannot gloss over ageing or illness but we can see beneath, we can see the beautiful and the wonderful. People who are ill, or old and infirm when we meet them were not always so. They have a history, experiences, skills, emotions, stories, relationships, likes and dislikes. They are themselves because of their experiences.

We should look for something else other than what is most evident. It's not too hard to find. Every one of us is filled with beauty, love and honour. Sometimes it's easy to forget that and allow the person to "become" their illness or their infirmity. It's a particular challenge for those caring for people in professional or personal roles.

We sanitise age and illness in popular culture. Maybe, we even sanitise death. If we believe in the image, when we are confronted with the challenges of illness or dying for ourselves or for our loved ones, or when we age, our perception can be completely different to reality.

This can hit us hard.

We celebrate (and rightly so) those who survive against all odds. The late Stephen Hawking was one of them. He survived for years when almost all others with Motor Neuron Disease/ Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis did not. We hope. We hope for eternal life, the elixir of youth; to be always healthy, wealthy and wise. We must hope. But everything comes to an end eventually. How we approach that end ourselves, and how we support others approaching the end is paramount.

We measure care on spreadsheets to be put into graphs in boardrooms. We focus on safety (which is vital, of course) but is this more important than measuring contentment and comfort? Is it more important than measuring the quality of life? And at no point can we suppose to know the answer without engaging people, carers and families.

Reading the poem made me think about the job I do. I am so glad I work with an organisation such as the Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF) that is trying to bring about change. An organisation that supports another way to care and communicate and encourages discussion and debate. The IHF has created a People's Charter on Dying Death and Bereavement in Ireland, based on the views of the Irish people. It is a constant reminder of how important it is to have aspirations and goals – even when at times they may seem difficult to reach.

I believe there is a wealth of knowledge for us to share and understand as individuals, organisations, carers, patients and industry leaders from experiences, personal stories and even from poems like the one above. They can go a long way toward helping us love and respect each other - as the people we are - as we face the most difficult times in our lives.

Perhaps you've heard of the IHF's 'Compassionate End of Life' Programme or CEOL for short. The CEOL programme works in nursing homes and residential centres. CEOL embeds a person-centred quality improvement approach which enables staff provide the best possible end-of-life care for people living in residential centres. They have listened to those who care for others, and recognise a peer support and education network is imperative to help ensure the person-centred care needed in our residential care settings. Put simply CEOL ensures the resident's own end-of-life care wishes are prioritised. It is one of the ways to answer the challenge in the poem. It helps us to "see ME".

Help the IHF by sharing your stories, or bringing the Charter to your family or organisation.

Tells us what you think. Contact us on info@hospicefoundation.ie

Learn more about CEOL: <https://hospicefoundation.ie/healthcare-programmes/residential-care/>

View the People's Charter on Dying, Death & Bereavement: <https://hospicefoundation.ie/haveyoursay/>

The IHF is a national charity, set up in 1986 to fund and develop hospice services. Since then, we have expanded our scope to encompass the key issues affecting the end of life. Our programme and services now seek to address the needs of people dying at home, in hospitals and in other care settings, as well as the needs of the bereaved. We also promote discussion of a broad range of issues related to dying, death and bereavement, in order to identify what matters most to Irish people at the end of life.