

Press Release

20 October, 2005

Not for release before 11.30 a.m, Tuesday, 25 October , 2005

New Charter Needed for Carers, says author

The UK's 5.2-million strong army of carers urgently need reforms to improve their lot, says Marion Shoard, the author of *A Survival Guide to Later Life*, speaking at the annual general meeting of the Carers' Support Centre, which helps carers in North Lincolnshire. "As a group, carers save the health service a massive amount of money - an estimated £57 billion every year - yet their needs are frequently overlooked", Miss Shoard said.

Miss Shoard demanded a charter for carers guaranteeing them better services, more money and proper training.

Services

She said: "Carers need far better support services, not least time off from their caring role. Assessments of carers' needs by social services departments, and, more importantly, the services provided as a result, are extremely patchy. The carer of an elderly person with Alzheimer's disease might be given help for only three hours a week in one area, while assistance might be provided several nights as well as during the day in another. The fault is not only local councils': the government's target for councils is only that they should assess 40 per cent of the carers in their areas."

“Carers are performing a vital public service in looking after frail, sick or disabled people, whether they be a disabled child, disabled partner or elderly partner or parent. They are de facto nurses, care assistants and counsellors and more besides, all rolled into one. If the job were employment in the normal sense, they would be entitled to recognition and respect, a wage based on a minimum hourly payment, not to speak of two full days off for every five days they worked.”

Cash

Miss Shoard went on:

“To add insult to injury, councils are free to charge carers for support services - even though the cared-for person needs help as a result of illness or disability - although fortunately councils do not always do so. We need far more cash passing from government to councils, ring-fenced so that it goes to carers, so that they can receive the breaks from caring and the support services they need without these making massive inroads into carers’ own finances.

“Also, carers should themselves receive higher payments from the state. Carer’s Allowance is not a large sum. What is more, the earnings restriction means that many carers, such as adults who look after elderly parents during the evenings, weekends and at night but go out to work during the day, are not eligible.

“Many carers are elderly themselves. But the government treats the state retirement pension as an “overlapping” benefit. This means that if a carer is receiving the state retirement pension, then because this is larger than Carer’s Allowance, no Allowance is paid.

Miss Shoard continued: “As carers’ earning power is usually reduced and the costs of anything from laundry to heating, to buying in help with housework or shopping can be very high, carers can very easily run into debt. A survey by the pressure group Carers UK showed that 77 per cent of people had become worse off since becoming a carer, often because they had had to give up paid employment. Almost 70 per cent reported that they worried about their finances either a lot or all of the time, and 60 per cent considered that the worry was affecting their health.”

Marion Shoard:

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“Nor is financial provision for carers getting any better. While the government expands free childcare provision and nursery education to add to the new “baby bond” cash handouts to every child, rich or poor, born since September 2001, it virtually ignores the plight of carers.”

Training

Finally, Miss Shoard turned to training for carers. She said:

“Carers frequently have to perform the same tasks as those carried out by care assistants and even nurses in care homes. Not only must they ensure that the cared-for person receives appropriate food, drink and medication, can move around and use the lavatory, they may also have to cope with complex conditions, such as paralysis after a stroke, substance abuse, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s disease or dementia.

Yet such training as carers receive varies enormously: they may receive some or none whatsoever. All carers deserve to be offered a fortnight’s free training before they take on caring and one-week’s annual training thereafter. This would not only help ensure that they provide good care, but also that they learned how to care without damaging their own health. Many carers suffer from health problems associated with their caring, such as back problems and depression, which training could mitigate.”

Need for Debate

Miss Shoard called for more debate and discussion about becoming a carer. She said: “The decision to become a carer can transform a person’s life just as dramatically if not more so than becoming a parent. Embarking on caring, say for an elderly parent, involves great uncertainty about how long caring will last and what the experience may hold. Also, people tend to become carers at a later stage in their lives than when they become parents. When, after caring, they try to regain their position in the workplace, they may find they have fallen a long way back and fall victim to ageist attitudes themselves.”

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Note for Editors:

A carer is a person who looks after or provides regular, unpaid help to a frail, sick or disabled partner, close relative or friend in their own or the cared-for person's home. There are more than 66,000 carers in Lincolnshire alone.

Marion Shoard became interested in the world of carers when, six years ago, her mother developed Alzheimer's disease. She was appalled at the lack of advice on how to cope (see attached Sunday Telegraph article) and has written a book entitled *A Survival Guide to Later Life*, published in 2004, inspired by that experience (see attached table of contents and extracts from reviews). More recently Miss Shoard had experience of being a cared-for person: at the end of last year she was injured on her way to a carers' conference in County Durham and, for a while, her daughter became her carer.

The event at which Miss Shoard will be speaking on Tuesday, 25 October will be held at St Mary's Church Hall, Barnard Avenue, Brigg, Lincolnshire between 10.30 am and 3 p.m.

For queries about this release, telephone Marion Shoard on 07743 534 443.

For queries about the work of the Carers' Support Centre and the event on 25 October, telephone 01652 650585.