

Age discrimination threatening lives of most vulnerable

Older people's lives will continue to be under threat because of ageism, unless the Government acts to ensure age discrimination is prohibited by upcoming legislation, according to a new report from Age Concern.

The failure of public authorities to outlaw discrimination means that older people are all too often denied life-saving treatment, discouraged from accessing vital health tests and denied transforming health and social care and mental health services. In-built discriminatory regulations, unfair practices and ageist attitudes all combine to mean older people – the primary users of health and social care – often receive inferior care and unequal public services.

“Age of equality? Outlawing age discrimination beyond the work place” is published ahead of the Government's Discrimination Law Review, which is due later this month. The Review will publish recommendations for the Single Equalities Act, which aims to bring together the existing legislation on protection against discrimination – and Age Concern is calling for it to include greater protection for older people.

The Age Concern report outlines the potential importance and impact of age discrimination protection – especially for the most vulnerable older people. It calls for public authorities, such as local and national government and the NHS, to be placed under a legal duty to promote age equality in every aspect of their work.

Existing forms of discrimination mean that anyone over 65 with mental health needs is not included in mainstream services, and so receives less funding and reduced services. There is also overt discrimination in breast cancer treatment and bowel cancer tests, and many older report receiving inferior health and social care.

Despite experience of ageism being three times more common than any form of discrimination – nearly one in four people (23%) has experienced some form of age discrimination – older people can also legally lose out on important goods and services simply because of the date on their birth certificate. Age Concern's report calls for light-touch protection against unjust discrimination in goods and services. Discrimination is pervasive across all aspects of the lives of older people: insurance, car hire and financial products are often denied to people over certain ages, or at an extortionate premium; volunteers often experience cut off ages; and older people can be denied membership of clubs and association or admission to places of entertainment.

Gordon Lishman, Director General of Age Concern, said:

“At present, older people can be openly and unfairly discriminated against simply because of their age. It means they can be denied life-saving or life-enhancing medical treatment, it means that they are unfairly charged a premium and it means they can receive inferior service simply because of their age.

“Age discrimination has been left behind by legislation for other forms of prejudice, legislation that has made a real difference to challenging unfair discrimination. It is now time to offer the same protection for older people who have, for too long, been treated as second class citizens.”

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