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## Commentary

## COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities in the care sector

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Covid-19 has spread around the world at a tremendous pace. On April the 12th, the total number of cases in the UK reached 84,279 including 10,612 deaths [1]. The UK Government introduced measures to reduce the spread of disease and the NHS is operating at full capacity to manage the demand. Meanwhile, more than 2000 care homes in England reported Covid-19 cases, which are underrepresented in national statistics [2]. Charities are calling for urgent action to support older people and the care sector.

While all societal and demographic groups are affected, older people are the most vulnerable for both physical and social reasons. From a health perspective, they are most likely to have comorbidities and weaker immune systems leading to stronger manifestations of the disease and a higher mortality rate. Over 95% of deaths caused by Covid-19 occur in those older than 60 years [3]. From a social perspective, older people, who often live alone and have mobility issues, are commonly dependent on support from communities and carers. Medical professionals are facing difficult decisions as they need to prioritise Covid-19 patients who are most likely to survive, thus elderly may be last in line to receive scarce resources such as ventilators and medications. Moreover, hospitals are being emptied and new admissions are restricted to create the headroom for Covid-19 patients meaning elderly will need to receive more care at homes.

In the UK, the adult social care sector faces a variety of threats and challenges, from Brexit to spending cuts. One of the most significant issues is a chronic shortage of carers. Even without additional threats, social care has been severely neglected - as highlighted in Guardian - "inadequately funded, undervalued and still not properly integrated into Britain's health services" [4]. Even, during the crisis, limited attention has so far been paid to social care and older people. Humphries expressed his concern saying that "Covid-19 has exposed the deep-rooted differences

between the NHS and social care, even though their undisputed interdependency will be tested to the limit in the days and weeks to come" [5]. According to WHO, support for older people and their carers is an essential part of the pandemic response [6]. Investment and focus on social care should be a top priority to protect both care workers and patients, and therefore ultimately reduce strain on the health system.

There are four main areas which are currently essential to support the care sector and thus those in need of receiving care: investment in personal protective equipment (PPE); testing; creating care roles; and utilising technology. First, all carers need to have access to PPE to protect themselves, their families and the vulnerable. So far, many local care providers struggled to procure those essentials [7]. Second, testing is also needed to more accurately gauge the spread of the disease and the extent of those most affected in the community rather than just in hospitals. Carers, just like medical workers, are at risk of physical and mental exhaustion and thus those measures are only the first steps to provide support [8]. Third, large numbers of people have become unemployed or unable to work due to lock-downs and social distancing; this has created a large pool of individuals who can potentially work in social care. People who have lost their jobs in retail, hospitality, airlines or other sectors could provide care to elderly or vulnerable people by providing companionship, household support and regulated services should they be trained appropriately. Unlike nurses and doctors, social care staff can be trained and deployed within days and weeks, rather than years, helping to address both a capacity issue in the system and support people seeking employment [9]. Finally, as loneliness due to isolation is rising, technology plays a role in helping people communicate safely. This benefit should be applied to social care. Patients could connect with their families but also carers can connect with other carers and operational teams. Apart from connectivity, digital solutions can offer online tools to assess a patient's condition and risk, thus identifying early signs of disease which could lead to early interventions and better recovery.

As the pandemic becomes a top priority for the world, it is time social care is appropriately recognised alongside health systems, and carers are seen as one of our most valuable resources. Policymakers must consider investment and appropriate measures that are commensurate with the responsibilities the sector carries.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

Dr Mahiben Maruthappu reports that he is a CEO of Cera Care - care provider company. Paulina Cecula works part-time for Cera Care. All other authors report no conflicts of interest.

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