Pulling back from the edge: an asset-based approach to ageing well

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper seeks to outline the ways in which the desire to age well is inextricably linked to the domains of community and associational life; relies for its strength on intimate, soft, human contact in addition to more distant, cold, professional services; can call on an abundance of untapped, local-based care and, with greater intentionality by policy makers and practitioners, can lead to better physical and mental health outcomes for senior citizens.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper is a reflection piece based on the proven qualities of asset-based community development as a process for convening conversations in communities – from which the latent, caring capacities of individuals and associations are unleashed – allowing communities to build from the inside out. Communities define an ageing well agenda for their locale and implement that agenda according to their capacities.*

Findings – *The paper finds that citizens and communities co-producing health outcomes will out-perform individuals reliant on professional medical services only.*

Practical implications – *Communities have immense resources for health creation; tapping those resources leverages more health benefits than professional medical interventions alone.*

Originality/value – *The paper challenges the omnipotent, medicalised, ''sickness'' model of healthcare and encourages the adoption of a model of healthcare in which citizens, older or otherwise, co-produce healthy lifestyles and health outcomes in their communities with the assistance of professionals.*

Keywords Asset-based community development, Ageing, Co-producing health, Resilience, Big society

Paper type Viewpoint

Providing better ambulances at the bottom of the cliff instead of fences at the top is a half-baked and wasteful endeavour for policy makers and practitioners alike; it resembles the cartoon world of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner, not a blueprint for a complex, integrated and functional society. Nowhere along the life-course is the futility of such practices more apparent than in the third and fourth ages. This reflection piece, therefore, is concerned with the means by which, with older people in the lead, families, communities and agencies can co-create better fences before the precipice, and ensure that a good life is nurtured well before people reach the ''edge''. To ensure people may age well and age their own way, an approach that focuses on identifying the wide range of assets that could be used to support an older person is more fruitful than current approaches, exclusively concerned as they are, with the needs and deficiencies of an increasingly ageing population.

Ageing well, across the life-course, in one's place, in a way that feels productive, surrounded by family, friends and neighbours, is everyone's business and is worthy of greater attention than is currently being afforded this simple, powerful ambition. The central crisis of modern welfare states is our neglect of the task of building hospitable, competent communities where young and old can age well and contribute their talents, skills and knowledge, while receiving the contributions of others in kind. Software – gentle, intelligent, human power – is needed, not the hardware of machinery and ambulances.

In policy terms, we are spending too much time seeking hardware answers to questions at the bottom of the cliff. Two more pertinent software ''top of the cliff'' questions which should concern us are:

1. What are citizens uniquely competent to do to lead an ageing-well agenda?

2. How can agencies/institutions support such citizen-led action?

There are ten domains within which senior citizens are uniquely competent, and if civic agency is not exercised in these domains then there is no viable, service-based alternative, regardless of how well resourced such services may be. No matter how many Acme Company™ solutions the coyote employs, he is always undone by the cunning and agility of the road runner. Similarly ageing well and dying with dignity require more than services and fiscal investment. They require the special capabilities of individuals and their communities – their cunning.

The ten domains are health, safety, care for the environment, safe food production and consumption, local economic development, raising young people, building strong communities, civic action towards deeper democracy and a more just society, response to emergencies and co-producing knowledge. A consideration of ageing well, using these domains, is instructive in broadening the narrative about what we need to age well.

First domain: health and wellbeing

The most significant factors determining one's health are the extent to which we are positively connected to each other, the environment we inhabit and local economic opportunities (McKnight and Block, 2010). The benefits of focusing on a health seeking, well-being agenda versus a disease model are undoubted[1]. However, allegiance to the ''sickness'' model continues to dominate the way in which practitioners and policy makers drive the health agenda (Harrop et al., 2007).

Balancing person-centred care services with an explicit community building agenda is not new; many savvy public health professionals have worked this way throughout their careers. That said, asset based co-creation for health approaches which promote community building approaches are not sufficiently embedded in mainstream thinking and practice to allow it to reach its tipping point.

Currently, the ageing well, wellbeing and health relationship is one of clients/patients in passive receipt of services from professionals/experts. A paradigmatic shift to a relationship between citizens, community builders and service providers working to co-create each other's wellbeing is required.

In 2007, I worked in the Dublin Docklands area to facilitate an asset-based approach to ageing well in place that illustrated the challenges of attempting such a paradigm shift. Relationships were often fraught with conflict, as disgruntled recipients of state funded services voiced their frustrations to public servants, in the vain hope that change would result, while professionals defended their approach. Older people spoke in stories, professionals in facts and figures. To chart our way out of this blame cycle, we facilitated older people to ''draw'' a new map of the territory with which older people and professionals could look at issues of health in a more equal, fresh way. This altered perceptions from the half-empty to the half-full part of the glass. There also emerged a deeper understanding by citizens that better health outcomes were not the unilateral responsibility of professionals, but required citizens and professionals to enter into relationships based on a co-creation model.

Second domain: safety and security

In the Dublin Docklands project, older people and the professionals both agreed safety was a priority. Early discussions relating to safety focused on Acme Company™ solutions such as more police and CCTV. The issues that most bothered older people, however, fell into the low-level, anti-social behaviour category demonstrating how security was deeply intertwined with feelings of isolation and loneliness. They were not alone in experiencing those feelings.

Over 56 per cent of residents in another asset-based project, based in a regeneration neighbourhood in Limerick, said they were concerned about older neighbours living in fear, but were unsure what they could do to help. When we connected those residents' instincts towards neighbourliness with their skills, knowledge and capacities, a range of meaningful, citizen-led initiatives emerged, many of which improved the quality of life of older people in the neighbourhood.

Research at the ABCD Institute suggests that the main determinants of our local safety are:

- How many neighbours we know by name.

- How often we are present and together with one another in the public areas outside our houses.

This research points back to the need for a greater level of relatedness at the street level, something that falls outside the gift of service provision; it is uniquely within the competence and control of people. That neighbourliness should be considered a lynchpin of a community safety strategy may seem counter-intuitive. However, anyone who has spent time working at neighbourhood level knows firsthand the correlation between isolation and vulnerability (perceived and actual) and will understand, therefore, the life-altering impact of building a social-support network. Increasing numbers of professionals are cognisant of these choices and are opting to put their energies into community building ever before serious problems arise.

Third domain: environment

Ageing well objectives do not exist in a separate orbit. Silo thinking that places environmental concerns, ageing well and economic and social development in separate spheres challenges our communities by compartmentalising expensive professional efforts. Intentionally thinking about ageing and environmental sustainability as interrelated, for instance, is critical to the progress of both agendas.

We are all aware of our elders' sensitivity to scarcity. Our parents and grandparents knew the value of keeping, in drawers, sheds and attics, a menagerie of things like buttons for when they might be useful again – not for them the unsustainability of built-in obsolescence or a throwaway mentality. Older people may re-educate us towards a less-wasteful, make and do philosophy; their internal ration books contain the knowledge that you cannot know what you need, until you first know what you have. Older people are able guides to their younger neighbours navigating the landscape of an ever deeper period of austerity.

Fourth domain: nurturing the local economy

Most enterprises that are now the mainstay of the SME sector in the UK were hatched in those same drawers, sheds and attics. Small local start up enterprises are blind to age, but hugely rewarding of time invested, sustained commitment and micro investment – three assets that many older people have in abundance.

There are two hatches through which the financial clout of older people is siphoned out of local communities, one to the benefit of distant communities and another to the benefit of commercial forces. The most recent estimate of British citizens living in or possessing a second home in France alone is half a million. About, 27 per cent of them pay taxes to French local authorities and so may be considered residents; this represents a loss of their accumulated pensions and social capital from their original locales in Britain (Lichfield, 2011)[2]. The second migration of older people's funds is to commercial care homes, often distant from the place where their ''residents'' earned the funds.

In both cases, people worked hard for a secure retirement, and just when they may be able to exercise that power in their communities, they depart to become a consumer of care home services – which cannot provide the personality of a respectful, integrated neighbourhood, or they parachute into an environment in which they are strangers with money, but no relatedness to the society in which they have chosen to live (*Costa Blanca News, passim*)[3]. The hills of Tuscany (nicknamed Chiantishire), France (Dordogneshire, etc.) and Spain

(Costashire) are home to many British pensioners who have traded the cash value of a home and the bonds of community, in which they lived and worked for a lifetime, for sun, for escape and to live in a homogeneous, older, English language community, separated from continental European cultures and societies (Guha, 2010).

Fifth domain: mindful food production and consumption

Allotments, which have mushroomed since the end of the economic boom, are not just spaces for individuals to produce their own food. They are social and educational spaces where gardeners can pass the time in the company of like-minded people; get exercise and exchange ideas, seeds, techniques and finally, enjoy the outputs of their efforts – freshly grown produce. The old demographic of these spaces, senior gentlemen, has been leavened by the greater participation of younger gardeners in the movement. Plants may cross-fertilise to improve their strains in these places, but more and more, in the exchange of knowledge and experiences, a new cross-fertilisation is taking place; a cross-generational transfer of wisdom and respect for nature, the environment and the food we put into our bodies.

Sixth domain: raising powerful, connected children

Children need to grow up in communities where they can safely connect with productive adults. Some children and families need professional support, but they also need the power of other people within their communities: the African proverb reminds us; ''it takes a village to raise a child''.

Associations such as sports clubs and bands are spaces where old and young are brought together for common purposes, be they physical development, to represent one's place, to enjoy leisure time in a convivial environment, to ''apprentice'', as it were, as a young adult, or all of the above.

Associational life is the critical ingredient in ageing well; beyond family, one's connections to informal social networks, from faith groups to social justice campaigns are key determinants of how long we live and how often we are sick. Associations that embrace and blend all generations bestow richness on young and old alike.

It is striking how divisions between young and older people dissolve when they focus on assets and contributions instead of needs and problems.

Seventh domain: building resilient communities

One of my favourite Western movie plotlines was the confrontation between the older, wiser men of a Native-American tribe and the younger ''braves'', under the shadow of the encroachment of white settlers, backed by a superior armed cavalry and large posses of civilians, onto Indian lands. These movies are strong allegories of change. At some stage in the film, as the older figures of the tribe aimed to sue for peace with the ''decent'' army officer, the most hot-headed brave would interrupt the negotiations, make a speech and depart leading the young braves on a guerrilla campaign that they would then lose.

The old chiefs are representative of the wisdom the older generation bring to society, they are like trees that bend with the wind knowing that to resist the gale means they will be toppled. The young may confuse that with gutlessness, and sometimes it may be hard to tell which is which, but older citizens have ''seen it all before'' and are less likely to panic, dis*per se* or to cut and run. Communities can learn from this spirit that confronts change and absorbs the best of it while retaining the best of what came before – it is a spirit that resides in our older citizens' DNA. The name for this is resilience.

Eight domain: civic action for deeper democracy and a just society

Civic action for social, environmental and economic justice keeps governments accountable, and democracy meaningful. Study after study in all democracies shows that older citizens

vote in greater proportion than other cohorts of the electorate; they have a greater desire to register their voices when called upon at election or referendum time. Since they are invariably less likely to benefit from the proposals under consideration at the polls, or to gain for only a short time in any case, the conclusion must be drawn that there is more at stake for them than their own personal gain. I think, beyond habit, they are voting to secure their vision for their families, communities and wider society and it is a refreshing riposte to the cynicism with which the political process may be viewed by more partisan sections of the electorate.

We cannot be too idealistic about the political ambitions of older people; they are capable too of ''direct action'' as the swift mobilisation of over 65s against medical card changes in Ireland in 2008 attests (Irish Senior Citizens Parliament, 2008). This movement gave the previous Irish government its most embarrassing metaphorical and literal handbagging.

Tony Blair's most embarrassing moment came when the women ''of a certain age'' at the Women's Institute national conference heckled and slow hand-clapped him – a withering put-down (Various news sources, June 2000)[4]. When older people take a stand it usually stays ''stood''.

Ninth domain: respond to emergencies

Nowhere is people power more apparent than in the face of emergencies; when put to the pin of our collar we dig deep, self-organise and respond. The main reason people power becomes so apparent then is because emergencies strip away system supports and inhibit institutional responses.

Older people have had a lifetime of learning how to endure; they are the repositories of stories about going on when the outcome is unclear, undecided and oblique.

A character in the last line of Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel, *The Unnamable*, says; ''I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.''

To go on takes spirit, Beckett's doubting, weary, yet defiant expression of the human spirit, is embodied in our senior citizens. It is what the Japanese call ''gaman''[5].

Tenth domain: co-producing knowledge and sharing wisdom

Knowledge and wisdom are most at home in the domain of associational life, they do not fare well restrained by curricular boundaries or commercial self-interest. Birmingham became the first city of the industrial revolution, in large part because people, chasing ideas and asking searching questions of science and technology, found co-conspirators in the associational life of that unfashionable town. The Lunar Society of Birmingham was the midwife to the industrial revolution, one of the greatest transformations in the British economy in the last millennium – it was a club for the free exchange and debate of ideas on science and the scientific method (Uglow, 2003)[6].

We are firmly in the age of the learning society; learning organisations and digital learning commons pay tribute to and pave the way for breakthroughs in collective intelligence. Though freshly packaged in digital form, such concepts are simply new iterations of something the people behind Birmingham's ''Midlands Enlightenment'' happened on by chance in the eighteenth century – we, at least, can be more intentional with our efforts. Salon like conversations of the Midlands Enlightenment still occur today; Stephen Denning, a former World Bank knowledge worker, calls them ''Springboard stories'', stories that cause ideas to spring to mind and in turn to change perceptions. I consistently encounter people, typically older people, who tell springboard stories.

They tend to be stories of a time when the community came together to make things better, always true and always told by a connector possessing an innate intelligence: these stories mobilise neighbourhoods by connecting them to the know-how of community building. They say we have achieved this before, this is how we did it, let's do it again. These innovators/connectors convene micro-enlightenments every day; in-tune community builders will find such storytellers and support them.

Conclusion

People of all ages need to give and receive care. Unfortunately, people are dying of loneliness in a sea of untapped care and compassion. There is a mismatch in the care, giving, respect and love outcomes between neighbourhoods and communities. Neighbourhoods are spaces in which older people are lonely and feel intimidated or unconfident about receiving care. Communities, conversely, are places where older people belong, feel useful and can contribute.

Too many older people are dying feeling lonely and useless; no institution can cure this. Our neighbourhoods are awash, however, with people who care deeply about the welfare of their older neighbours, but have fallen out of the habits of ''neighbourliness'' and mutuality, the channels through which such care is expressed. Older people are crying silently, caring neighbours are too diffident. They need to be brought together.

If people are isolated in a sea of potential neighbourliness, and are even more isolated in a sea of institutionalised care, then we need to concern ourselves as a society more with the building of hospitable communities and less with the building of hospitals and the provision of hospital and care home beds. The software of hospitable communities trumps the hardware of hospitals when it comes to loneliness and isolation.

The art of building hospitable communities where social connections are valued will define the liveability of our cities and countries more than any other social intervention before 2050, when the planet's population will be older, more populated and more urbanised than ever.

The adoption of an asset-based perspective in policy and practice provides environmental, economic and social pathways towards ageing well, while also ensuring multiple secondary gains for communities across the life-course. It also clears the way to recognising that without the contribution of older citizens, the work needed to activate the ten domains will not get done.

The asset-based perspective views older people as endowed with competencies as well as needs; recognises that regardless of governmental and non-governmental institution resources, they cannot unilaterally produce health, cannot care for older people or create safe communities where they can age well. Such outcomes require real partnership between citizens and institutions, but with senior citizens and their neighbours in the lead.

Over the last 20 years, this simple but groundbreaking proposition has been successfully translated into practical action by a significant number of communities and by public sector agencies, voluntary organisations and local governments around the world; as a means of effecting real, lasting social and economic change, it is peerless.

Most recently in Britain, I have had the privilege of being involved in an number of such initiatives, including Croydon NHS who have adopted an asset based approach to progress their ageing well agenda and are piloting the process in Thornton Heath. While in Gloucestershire the Barnwood Trust are just beginning to act as conveners for a countywide process whereby asset-based thinking is being used as lens through which to explore the best means of catalysing hospitable communities.

Separately over the last three years the PCT's and CVS's in West Lancashire have worked hand in glove to promote an asset-based approach across the county and to great effect on issues as wide ranging as recovery related to substance misuse to promoting collaborative consumption of physical resources. A number of community foundations are now also looking to asset-based approaches as a means of taking a fresh look at grass roots grant making.

The processes that assist local residents to grow welcoming communities where people can age well are:

1. Asset mapping:

   ■ individuals;

   ■ associations;

   ■ institutions;

- environment and physical infrastructure; and

- economic exchange.

2. Matching grants that mobilise ideas for action into community-led projects. The principle is that micro grants are matched by citizen sweat equity on the basis of a 50/50 match, citizens do not match with money but with voluntary effort. This is a powerful way to support local action/project ideas.

3. Engaging with young people and supporting them to become community builders and inter-generational advocates. This involves using innovative processes to involve young people to develop a plan to build community. In every instance, we have seen youth-led projects that reach out to older people in innovative and reciprocal ways and that trigger transformative inter-generational networks.

4. Engaging with people who have been marginalised or labelled as deficient in some way. Building bridges from labelled people into the centre of community life, supporting them to contribute their talents and having a voice in what happens locally has been central to the work of the ABCD Institute and Nurture Development in over 40 countries throughout the world since it was established in 1995.

5. Innovation Forums are used to bring people together to celebrate their achievements in the matching grants projects or other locally led initiatives and to share their learning. These ''Lunar Societies'' are engine rooms inspiring a powerful, collective voice for change.

6. Developing neighbourhood plans and seeking support and investment. Once a plan is in place, there will be parts of the plan that local residents can drive themselves, parts they will need external agencies to partner with them on to achieve results, and some elements of the plan will need to be addressed exclusively by outside agencies.

Kretzmann and McKnight have demonstrated that neighbourhood assets are key building blocks in sustainable, urban and rural community revitalisation efforts, a critical part of which is the creation of age-friendly communities.

These assets include:

- The shared and latent capacities of people, of all ages and abilities; a gift is not a gift until it is given.

- The capacities of associations – people doing together what they cannot do alone.

- Institutions that balance people-centred service provision and community building, and act more like treasure chests than fortresses.

- The physical environment.

- The local economy.

- The arts and culture.

- Stories.

ABCD recognises the tremendous capacity in every neighbourhood that is not utilised or is under-utilised and despite this monumental oversight there exists a reservoir of opportunities – if we organise neighbourhoods to become communities and re-focus our institutions.

Neighbourhoods facing social fabric issues, exclusion and conflict need those ''unemployed'' assets as well as needing services from external suppliers if they are to become places where people can age well, i.e. communities.

The traditional policy focus has pointed neighbourhoods toward professional, Acme Company™ supports from the outside. This focus is useful, to a point, but it is also deeply limited.

The ABCD approach, in contrast, acknowledges the need for outside supports, but argues these supports should not come at the expense of social connections or the individual or collective agency of people across the life-course.

This process encourages people to work across bonded comfort zones; to focus on how we build a community from a neighbourhood; creating places where everyone belongs and everyone can contribute.

Working as a resident in an asset-based way involves many hours of training and deep conversation. Conversations start with initiating groups of residents, who care deeply about the area and who, in turn, initiate greater citizen engagement.

Inevitably, conversation-holders act, in a meaningful way, on what concerns them most. Out of that meaningful action comes more and more connections, and so a virtuous circle of conversations about what people care about leads to meaningful action and in turn that leads to deeper connections and stronger, more inclusive community.

This is community-building work and its stated aim is to continually widen the circle of community participation, contribution and inclusion. It is the most hopeful route to ageing well in place.
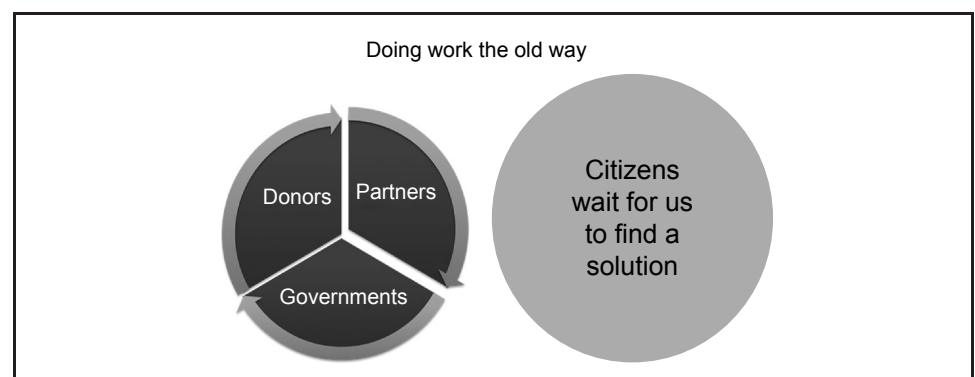
ABCD says the objectives of social inclusion and ageing well are most effectively met when it supports a local community to:

■ Identify, connect and mobilise its assets rather than its needs, primarily focusing on using what it has to move towards what it wants.

■ Change the conversation towards a process of listening, learning and action; discovering what people care about enough to act upon, and recognising that concern for ageing well is built into the fabric of human existence and will emerge through such a process.

■ Work with agencies and institutions to deepen their facilitative practice as community builders and move to following the lead of citizens and communities – as well as listening deeply to their employees as people and not just units of production in a command and control system. This means that, potentially, all professionals could become assets for community building, Community builders and providers of person-centred services.

At policy level, the ABCD approach calls for a shift from a transactional way of thinking about initiating change, a shift which involves government, their partners and donors in researching social and economic challenges and setting down programmatic parameters and service offerings for addressing them (Figure 1) – to transformative approaches (Figure 2). The ''find it''; ''fund it'' and ''fix it'' approach to any social challenge, especially ageing well, means that citizens are inevitably relegated to the status of clients of state funded services. The alternative is to place citizens in the driving seat, and in particular those most segregated by age and dysfunction.
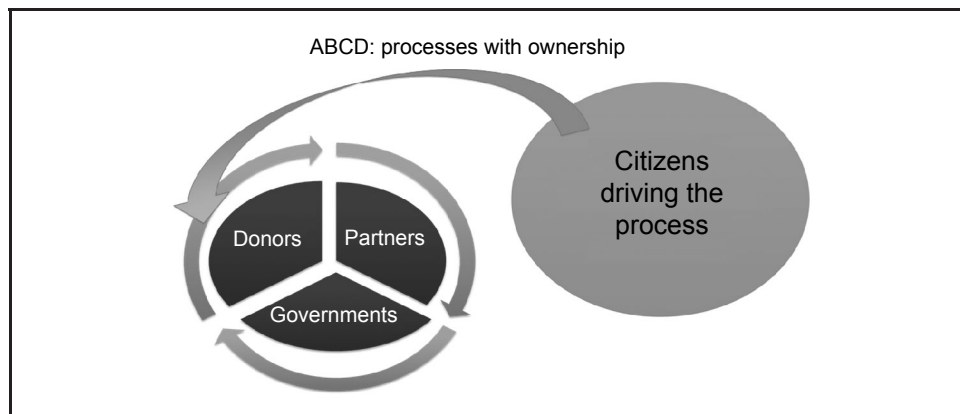
Recently, an Irish friend of mine told me of his mother's one-person campaign to save her local post office. A recipient of an old age pension from the Irish state since 1993, she has consistently refused the social welfare office's requests to alter the method of payment from book payments at the local post office to a direct transfer into her bank account. Her suspicion

Figure 1

Doing work the old way

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Governments

Citizens wait for us to find a solution

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Figure 2

of state ''munificence'', born out of organic socialism or the cunning of those who feel less powerful than those in charge, has convinced her that their real agenda is to save money at the expense of her and the local community. She argues, convincingly, that if all payments were made this way then the post office would lose an important economic function and move closer to closure. Her Friday routine involves collecting her pension at the post office, making some purchases there, visiting the Church for mass or, when it is her turn, to clean the church (the informal ''widow's and women's union'' work a rota), a visit to the credit union to lodge money into her and her daughters' and grandchildren's accounts (making that local-financial institution stronger and educating younger people in the ways of financial management).

His anecdote is a familiar one, and it serves as a reminder of the importance of social networks and associational life to ageing well across the life-course, as well as of the vital contribution that older people make across all ten domains, a contribution that lies hidden in plain view.

In the final analysis, a community that has not created intentional space for older people and their contributions is a community that is lessened in health, security and prosperity and in one way or another is populated by individuals heading for an ambulance at the bottom of a metaphorical cliff. Only citizens can build a good life behind, well in from the cliff face. Is it not time to pull back from the edge; to recognise that there is more to ageing well than services, and more at stake than funding? If so, is it not also time for those working professionally with older people to balance service provision with community building?

The Wile E Coyote versus the road runner comparison cannot be dismissed as flippant. Focusing exclusively on the ''hardware'' of machinery, hospitals and medicines is, ultimately, as pointless as the coyote's fascination with Acme Company™ products to capture the road runner. ABCD offers the alternative vision. While ever respectful of the need for clinical hardware and institutions, ABCD says look at the ''software'' of individuals, associations and the limitless energy of social relationships. It is a process capable of harnessing the under-utilised and untapped cunning of all people in society, and who carries more cunning than our senior citizens?

Notes

1. A glass half-full: how an asset approach can improve community health and well-being (Foot, 2009).

2. 500,000 estimate of Britons living year-round in France, 135,000 registered for tax.

3. However, many British people who made the move to Spain now find that, due to the devaluation of Sterling against the euro over a decade and the complexity of British social security rules, they are relatively poorer than had they stayed in Britain. Jones (2011), Kett (2011), Fueyo and Pèrez (2011) and Marques (2011).

4. All major British news sources, 7-10 June 2000.

5. A Japanese term derived from Zen Buddhism, meaning fortitude in times of unbearable challenge.

6. A Guardian reviewer commented: ''Uglow shows how childlike daydreams and Heath-Robinson contraptions gave way to some of the greatest inventions of mankind.''

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