

Health Dialogue Group

Rabbi Baroness Julia Neuberger

There are three key gradual changes that give me some hope in the field of healthcare, alongside major scientific breakthroughs and increasing benefit from scientific research.

First, the scientific evidence – and its increasing acceptance – that the neural networks of young children develop hugely much faster than that of older children and adults, and that therefore investment in the health and well-being of young children is the most valuable thing we can do to make the world a better place. With increased, though still inadequate, vaccination programmes; increased, though still inadequate, provision of mosquito nets and anti-malarial drugs; and increased, though wholly inadequate, parenting programmes for young parents, there is some hope that the health of young children will improve, that the death rate of the under-five-year-olds will gradually fall, and that investing in children will be seen as the most important thing for development, health and aid agencies alike, alongside governments.

Second, there is some evidence that the treatment of the very old is improving in some developed countries, with a reduction in thinking of them as a drag on society, of no “use,” who ought to be “put out of their misery.” Despite growing calls for physician-assisted suicide, the level of care in nursing homes and care homes is improving, and the importance of the well-being of old people, and their need for intergenerational encounters, is rising up the “must do” ladder of policy professionals.

Third, the view of health as being only a narrow concern for doctors and nurses is beginning to change. In debates about end-of-life care, older people’s care, and younger and disabled people’s care, the professional skills of health professionals are seen as only one part of the jigsaw. Human kindness, carers who truly care, holistic and alternative approaches, complementary therapies, and a broader definition of the nature of well-being and mental well-being are all coming into play. As a result, although the health professionals’ definition of some people’s health may be highly pessimistic, their own analysis of their health and well-being often demonstrates a marked difference of perception, with a far higher level of satisfaction and sense of well-being than health professionals could have believed possible. This is all related to increasing our understanding of well-being as being different from concepts of physical or mental health, according to objective indicators, and has transformed older people’s care in some societies.

So, although the world is full of illness and disease, although mental illness is a scourge and poorly understood, I see signs of hope for our health and well-being in a complex world.

Rabbi Julia Neuberger