

## 'Stolen Spring': Danish elders in *plejehjem* under COVID-19 visiting restrictions

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By

First published in 1940, Hans Scherfig's *The Stolen Spring* (*Det Forsømte Forår*) is both a satirical crime novel and a wry social commentary. Through his description of a school's sociocultural dynamics and how administrators handle the murder of a teacher, Scherfig pointedly criticises particular patterns and structures in Danish society. As [one reviewer wrote](#): "The small, scared schoolboys are made into big, scared men educated to sustain the system that deprived them of their own childhood." Scherfig's work highlights how such de-individualising systems can break down a person's imagination, independence, and dreams for the future so thoroughly that they eventually perish.

Now, 80 years later, many of our elders are facing a similar fate due to the 'stolen spring' caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Starting 12 March, when the Danish government implemented a national lockdown, all citizens were encouraged to self-isolate, increase hand hygiene, and remain physically distant from each other in order to prevent hospitals and healthcare workers from becoming overburdened by patients needing intensive medical care. But there was also an [explicit call to protect vulnerable social groups](#) at risk of serious consequences from the virus, particularly people with compromised immune systems or chronic diseases as well as those aged 65+ and especially those aged 80+.

### ***Visiting in the context of besøgsforbud***

This meant that, as soon as the lockdown was implemented, the national health authorities instituted a visiting restriction (*besøgsforbud*) at all of the country's long-term care facilities (*plejehjem*). Thus, according to [the official guidelines](#) developed by the Danish Health and Medicines Authority (*Sundhedsstyrelsen*) in collaboration with the Danish Patient Safety Authority (*Styrelsen for Patientsikkerhed*), people living in *plejehjem* were only permitted to receive visits from "close relatives in critical situations." Moreover, visitors with any symptoms of illness were prohibited, and the visit itself had to be conducted outdoors "with a distance of two meters between all participants."

As soon as I heard about these restrictions, I thought: *This is not good.*

Under 'normal' circumstances, I am an ethnologist at the [Center for Healthy Aging](#) at the University of Copenhagen (UCPH). But since 16 March, I have also been coordinating an interdisciplinary research project, "[Standing together – at a distance: how Danes are living with the corona crisis](#)," based at UCPH's Department of Public Health. This project has been documenting developments in the population's mental health, including feelings of social isolation and loneliness, related to the pandemic and lockdown in Denmark. We conducted telephone interviews with [32](#) people across the country, including 14 people (8 women and 6 men) between the ages of 65 and 83, to gain insight into how the pandemic and lockdown affected their mental health, everyday behaviour, and social lives (both in person and through virtual platforms).

### ***Isolating elders in plejehjem***

Unfortunately, we have been unable to speak with elders living in *plejehjem*. The visiting restriction means that even close family members have found it difficult to obtain information. As one of our interlocutors, Karen\* (age 64), explained, "My mother lives in a care facility, and she's locked in there – you can't come in to see her, and she can't get out. And you don't hear anything about anything because she can't take the phone." During the first weeks of the lockdown, many of our interlocutors (of varying ages) said that they felt like they were living in a "bubble" or a "prison." For people in *plejehjem* – who have been isolated in their rooms with little social interaction and just an hour a day outside in the yard – comparisons to captivity are all the more striking.



*The locked front doors and nearly empty parking lot (below) at a plejehjem in my neighbourhood. At 5:00pm on a sunny Sunday (14 June 2020), this would typically be primetime for visits from family members and friends. (Photos by Amy Clotworthy)*



As of this writing in August 2020, the rate of infection in Denmark has been stable, and many aspects of society have re-opened. It's 'business as usual' – although everyone is now required to wear a protective mask on public transportation. But the visiting restrictions in *plejehjem* have only slightly eased. Revised guidelines from the Ministry of Health (*Sundheds- og Ældreministeriet*), [shared publicly on 9 June](#), state that residents may receive regular visits from up to two people, and the visit may occur indoors – but only if a resident's health or the physical environment of the care facility prevents the visit from taking place outdoors. Visitors should still maintain a physical distance of two meters.

The new guidelines offer *plejehjem* residents some relief from total isolation; however, the restrictions remain problematic. As Karen said, "It's such an ethically strange thing, I think, that a 95-year-old woman can't see her family." I agree. The visiting restriction reinforces a de-individualising system that both ignores and devalues older people's essential personhood and denies their agency – as well as their need for human touch. In general, all humans need physical and social contact to thrive. But, as the visiting restriction continues with no end in sight, these elders may spend the next months – very possibly the final months of their lives – enduring "crushing isolation and...a great deal of stress and uncertainty" (Landry et al. 2020).

### ***Older people, rights, and the pandemic***

In [an article](#) about deaths from COVID-19 in United States nursing homes, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) wrote that the landmark 1999 U.S. Supreme Court decision [Olmstead v. L.C.](#) recognised that the "unjustified institutional isolation of persons with disabilities is a form of discrimination." Such confinement limits every part of a person's life and "perpetuates unwarranted assumptions that persons so isolated are incapable or unworthy of participating in community life." Similarly, we must consider how older people's quality of life and well-being are affected by policies and restrictions that demand their social isolation; confining them indefinitely and preventing them from having contact with their loved ones during a pandemic seems a particularly cruel and unusual punishment.

The COVID-19 pandemic is illuminating many societal weaknesses – and there is a pressing need to discuss how to reform and re-design long-term care institutions so that residents can remain safe while respecting their essential personhood, value, and right to human sociality. As Hans Scherfig suggested 80 years ago, certain institutional systems can break a person down so thoroughly that they eventually perish. I fear that, as our stolen spring extends into a stolen summer and beyond, social isolation and visiting restrictions may break our elders down so thoroughly that they

prematurely perish.

*\* All of our interlocutors have been given a pseudonym, and we have removed identifying features from their quotes so that it is not possible to recognise them.*

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