

FELLOWSHIP REPORT ON:

Media coverage on the elderly care sector and care workers

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Introduction

The elderly care sector takes up a lot of space in the Danish media coverage. There's a good reason for that.

The number of citizens over 80 years old is expected to increase from 272,326 people in 2020 to 561,180 people in 2045 according to figures from Statistics Denmark and VIVE¹.

With a growing elderly population and recruitment challenges among care workers the problems are escalating as the number of people at 80+ years old really begins to rise over the next ten years at the same time as one third of the current care workers are expected to retire.

Today, 76,000 care workers are employed in the municipalities and the five regions in Denmark (37,300 as helpers and 30,300 as assistants²). In order to keep up with the demographic changes, this number of care workers must increase to 145,000 in 2045 if we want to just *maintain* the level care as it is today, according to a Momentum Analysis made for KL³.

Even though this is an area that gets a lot of media attention, I have discovered during my fellowship, that the *quality* of the coverage is often lacking. The purpose of this report though, is not to point fingers of hardworking colleagues. As a journalist covering this area and always with a deadline coming fast at me, I have probably fallen into all the "reporting traps" myself. Therefore I wanted to dig deeper into this field, because I needed my reporting to be more nuanced and I wanted to do a more adequate and simply better coverage.

Later in this report I will go into depth with the problems I discovered in the coverage and even more relevant I will share suggestions on how to do more nuanced and thorough journalism in this area. These pieces of advice are based on interviews with people working in the care sector and my own conclusions after 10 months analyzing this field.

In case you're in a hurry (maybe working on a deadline) and don't have time to read the full report, I will share my most valuable learnings right away:

- We tend to underestimate how complex the care worker job is. We often assume that our audience knows what the care worker job contains and as a result of that we often don't describe the actual work in detail or if we do, we describe the simplest part of it.
- When doing solutions-oriented journalism in this area reporters usually don't challenge the solutions with the same effort as they would put in investigating the problem. One example of this could be a DR news story from October 2021⁴. The article describes how Syddjurs Municipality has solved the problem with the many hours spent on documentation by

¹ [VIVE Report 2021: "Social- og sundhedshjælpere og social- og sundhedsassistenter i kommunerne"](#)

² Same as above

³ [Momentum Report 2020: "Behov for markant flere elever på sosu-uddannelser for at klare ældreboomet"](#)

⁴ [Nyhedshistorie fra DR, 2021: "Hjemmeplejere styrer nu selv arbejdstid og organisering"](#)

using smaller, self-organized teams. But what is missing in the articles is an explanation on how this is possible with the many demands for documentation? The politician who is interviewed is quoted for saying “it’s not more expensive”, “we trust the care workers to know what’s the best way of working” and “of course there’s some necessary documentation, but we need to give the care workers time and peace to do their job”. To make an article like this stronger and to learn something from reading it we need to challenge these answers much more.

- Reporters often fail to understand the very complicated legislation on this area and as a result of that we don’t ask the right critical questions.

If we look at the same example with the DR story the reporter should be aware that it’s national legislations that demand the heavy documentation. It’s not just up to the municipalities to decide how much documentation they need. If the reporter knows this he or she will be much more prepared to ask the right critical and curious questions which could be “Exactly how is it possible to do less documentation and still meet the demands from legislation?” The answer to this question could be something other municipalities could learn from.

- When choosing sources for a journalistic piece make sure to make the voices of people *receiving* the care heard.

This might sound like an obvious thing to stress but as I will describe later in this paper it’s very rare that people receiving care is the primary source in articles. If we as journalists change that we will bring more nuances and perspectives into the coverage, and it has the potential to also create more solution-based journalism to the table because chances are the people who are receiving care have relevant suggestions for improvement.

Background

It’s difficult to translate the Danish job titles “social- og sundhedsassistent” and “social- og sundhedshjælper” into English because the Danish education programs are quite unique and there is no exact comparison when translating the titles. Actually, you could easily compare a “social- og sundhedsassistent” to a nurse in some countries when looking at the different education systems in different countries.

In this report I’m using the term “care workers” as a term for “sосу’er” meaning both “social- og sundhedsassistent” and “social- og sundhedshjælper”.

Striving to be more nuanced though, it can be problematic to describe the two quite different jobs with one term as it has been documented⁵ that it blurs the differences between the professions and contributes to inaccurate portrayals and the low status of the field that is dominating in society.

Going forward this is something to keep in mind when covering this area.

The care worker job has only become more complex during the years since the beginning of the SOSU educations in 1991. The complexity is due to greater demands of the number of different tasks the care workers are expected to do, one of the explanations for that is the shorter hospitalization periods today where a large part of the rehabilitation and care takes place at home.

At the same time, the number of elderly citizens with one or more chronic diseases has increased. As a result of that greater demands are placed on the employees’ professionalism and competences, which also means that the training and education have been expanded several times over the years. Today there are

⁵ [VIVE Report 2022: "Analyse af social- og sundhedsfagenes image og imageudfordringer"](#)

two separate education programs, with the helper training program taking 2 years and 2 months and the assistant training program taking 3 years, 9 months and 3 weeks.

Today, the helper training focuses on care (in Danish: der er tale om både pleje og omsorg) and rehabilitation with tasks falling under the Service Act (in Danish "serviceloven").

The assistant training is aimed at basic and clinical nursing in complex citizen cases, interprofessional collaboration and towards the assistants being able to independently solve tasks that fall under the Health Act (In Danish "sundhedsloven").

During a normal workday, both groups of employees solve various tasks that fall under both legislations, often during the same visit to a citizen. But there are different rules and requirements for documentation depending on whether the task falls under one or the other legislation. This has consequences for the complexity of work with the elderly population and other in the need of care in municipalities. For comparison, hospitals only operate under one legislation ("sundhedsloven") when solving corresponding tasks.

Nevertheless, the care worker job is often simplified and described as a job "everyone" can do. A job where you just clean and change old peoples' diapers. Talking about the employees in journalistic pieces, they are often turned into a "mass" and the nuances of the work and the demands on the employees are rarely described in detail.

The media's influence on the perception of the issue

In the summer 2020 TV 2 published the documentary "Plejhjemmene bag facaden" alongside with a day-to-day coverage in news broadcasts. A documentary that was nominated at the Cavling Award. By using hidden cameras, the viewer gets a heartbreaking look at the reality of two nursing home residents who are suffering as a result of the staff being too busy or unprofessional.

No doubt the purpose of this documentary was to improve the living conditions for elderly people at nursing homes and to improve the working conditions for care workers. But what actually happens after a critical coverage like this?

As a result of this documentary - and several other complaints from relatives in the time following - one Aarhus based nursing home was offered by the municipality as many resources needed to hire more staff to secure a better quality of life for the nursing home residents. But it was impossible to recruit any care workers. There was simply no one available. This is just one example showing the national problem with lack of care workers.

Despite national campaigns trying to recruit more people into the SOSU schools, changing governments have not succeeded in increasing the number of educated healthcare staff the last years.

There are definitely a number of reasons causing this issue, and media coverage influencing the perception in society could be one of them.

Analysis shows that 75 % of media coverage is critical

In September 2022 VIVE, The Danish Center for Social Science Research, published a report⁶ on how the

⁶ [VIVE Report 2022: "Analyse af social- og sundhedsfagenes image og imageudfordringer"](#)

images of care workers is presented in Danish media and how that effect peoples' perception of the job. Previous reports have shown that problematic images of the care worker job have a negative influence on the recruitment and retention of employees⁷.

To learn more the Danish Health Authority (Sundhedsstyrelsen) requested VIVE to do a report containing information on what characterizes the care worker professions' image, including who and what constitute prejudices and myths as well as which areas of action and actors can contribute to promoting a more nuanced image of the professions.

The report contains a media analysis⁸ of 92 articles dealing with the care offered in municipalities published by various national and regional newspapers (e.g. Politiken, Kristeligt Dagblad, Jyllands-Posten, Information, Berlingske, Ekstra Bladet, BT, Aarhus Stiftstidende) and some in professional Journals (FOA, Alzheimerforeningen). The articles are published from 2016-2021. To learn more about data and method please go to page 31 in the VIVE report.

There is a lot of useful information in the report, and I would recommend any journalists covering this field to take a closer look. In the following **I have chosen to highlight 3 important learnings.**

Based on the systematic review of the 92 articles, VIVE finds two competing images.

A poor image that is linked with negative representations such as bad working environment and a narrative that care workers appear as unsympathetic and disengaged employees who do not have the qualifications to choose another educational path.

The positive image, on the other hand, is associated with complex and care related tasks that require a great deal of compassion and professional competences, and which ultimately make a difference for vulnerable people.

There is a **clear majority of the poor image**: VIVE finds that 69 of the 92 articles generally give a negative perception of the field.

This is probably not surprising for anyone who has followed this topic, but it is interesting to get data on how there's a clear majority of critical or negative angled articles. This analysis would of course have been stronger if it contained a larger number of articles and if it also included the coverage in broadcasts. But it still gives us an idea of the media landscape and combined with my own research I consider this to be a trustworthy result.

In my opinion the goal is not to make half and half of what VIVE calls "positive" and "negative" stories. But it's definitely valuable to be *aware* of how the typical focus in articles is often negative and to be aware that this is affecting society's perception of care workers.

Another important learning from the media analysis is the systematic review of the **primary sources quoted in the article**. The most typical source to appear in the articles is a care worker (appears as primary source in 25 out of the 92 articles). Then follows association and interest groups (16), relatives (15), managers (4) and politicians (4). Then follows a few more types of sources and then in the bottom of the list is the people receiving care, who appear as the primary source in only 2 out of 92 articles.

This is very odd to me. Why are people that are receiving care the least used source to be interviewed by journalists? My own research shows that one explanation for this is old habits and fast deadlines. But we

⁷ [Rambøll 2018: "Kortlægning af rekrutteringsudfordringer"](#)

⁸ [VIVE Report 2022, medieanalysedelen: "Mediernes fremstilling af social- og sundhedsfagene"](#)

are missing out on nuances when we as journalists are not talking to the most relevant people (alongside with the care workers). Of course, there can be cases where the person receiving care lives with severe dementia or is too ill to be interviewed, but in many cases it would show more respect to trust the people getting care to have a valuable saying.

The last learning I want to highlight from the VIVE media analysis is something that has also been an important topic in my conversations with people in or close to the care sector. **Taking a closer look at who is constituting the negative narratives** or critical views in the coverage, it turns out it is the care workers themselves and their professional organization FOA who are most often the ones to present the critical voices. In many articles care workers, managers or FOA stress a frustration with either society's lack of understanding of the care worker professions or problems with working conditions. The people working in the care sector end up, probably unintentional, reproducing the negative image of their profession.

This is a dilemma. My research shows that this is something managers, directors and also FOA is aware of. From my conversations during this fellowship I've learned that it's a struggle for the professionals to find the right balance in criticizing what needs to be improved and not at the same time scare off potential care worker aspirants.

According to the VIVE report people in the care sector believe that the media industry contributes to an imprecise, flawed and generalizing representation of the care worker professions which confirms and reproduces the prejudices and myths that exist about the professions as well as contributing to the maintenance of the perception that the care worker job is stressful and unsatisfying. The participants interviewed in the report stress that the media have a co-responsibility for creating public information and going forward the focus should be on creating a more nuanced and factually based presentation of the care worker professions.

As a journalist I also believe media are partly responsible for the large number of critical voices of the care workers. When we in 75% of the news coverage have a negative angle and do interviews with care workers with that in mind, we *will* get negative quotes. For example, when covering a story about a severe problem at a nursing home, journalists will find a staff member voicing a concern for working conditions or lack of educated employees. This is quite natural and necessary thinking for a journalist. This is not something that in my opinion needs to change. But if we want to present a truthful version of the world, we must be better at showing the whole picture meaning that we can not only show up at nursing homes doing interviews with care workers and their managers whenever there's a problem and never when things are going smoothly.

The work process during my fellowship

Working as a TV reporter doing news stories for the evening broadcasts at TV 2 Denmark I was longing for time to dig deep and reflect on my own work. I have a big interest in covering health and going into this fellowship I wanted to investigate the recruiting problems in the elderly care sector and look into *if* or *how* the media coverage is affecting the recruiting.

Reporting on daily news, I have been used to running fast and learning as much as possible about a topic during a workday. Maybe two days if I was lucky. This way of producing journalism doesn't allow the time to read a full report or do all the research I would like to. On a positive note, I'm used to meeting people in real life when doing interviews but often in quite a hurry.

With my background and daily work process in mind, I knew I wanted to spend my 10 months fellowship diving into thorough reports, and having long, off record conversations with relevant sources. When talking to people working in this industry, they often think that journalists are only looking for the hair in the soup. Because of that I thought it would require a great deal of effort, time and patience to rebuild the trust in the media business of care workers and their managers. But reaching out has been quite easy and all the experienced and knowledgeable people I have talked to have been more than willing to share their honest thoughts with me. It has been a clear advantage to be able to spend the necessary time to talk to the sources and return again later on, and I found that especially care workers on the floor have found it easier to talk to me knowing they wouldn't appear in a national broadcast.

The research and learnings I have presented are based on reports (some of them mentioned in the above), articles, broadcasts and conversations with people depending on help from care workers, care workers, nurses, managers on different levels in nursing homes as well as municipalities, study counsellor, the Danish Schools of care workers (Danske SOSU Skoler), FOA, researchers and more.

Thank you to all the people who have taken the time to share their insights with me including the staff at Constructive Institute, my fellow colleagues, and my husband who's working in a nursing home and with whom I've spent hours and hours discussing this topic.