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What is the price of a life?

A decade after the economic crash and a year into a global pandemic, some of us are still more equal than others — and inequality is still on the rise

On 9 April, the husband of England's queen died at the age of 99. The queen of the United Kingdom has no political or executive role — rather, she has constitutional and representational duties and, according to the royal website, 'acts as a focus for national identity, unity and pride; gives a sense of stability and continuity; officially recognises success and excellence; and supports the ideal of voluntary service'. The queen's husband had no formal role, other than to support the queen, but he was a patron, president or member of more than 780 organisations and established the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, a self-improvement programme for young people aged 14 to 24.

These are valuable things to have done and Prince Philip's life was indeed one of service. But when the BBC cleared its schedules to cover the news of his death, taking one channel off air and devoting two others to hours of rolling coverage, it seemed to have misjudged how much the country actually wanted to hear about his life and work. The BBC received 109,741 complaints from the public — the most it has ever received on a single issue.

The fleeting memory of an 'ordinary' life

During the global pandemic, close to three million people have died of Covid-19, including 127,274 in the UK at time of writing. There have been some admirable and poignant efforts to acknowledge and pay tribute, including the *Guardian* newspaper's Lost to the Virus series, the Loved and Lost project of the *Manchester Evening News* and similar memorial activities in national and local news outlets.

But the marking of the passing of 'ordinary' lives is always transient, and brief, compared with the time and attention we give to the rich and the famous. The vast airtime and column inches we devote to remembering the lives of celebrities is a marker of the sharply contrasting value we place

upon them.

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By the end of 2020, more than 850 healthcare workers had died in the UK from Covid-19; more than 3,000 have died in the United States. And across the globe healthcare workers — on the frontline trying to save lives — have paid a heavy toll.

In the early stages of the pandemic, certain occupations were hurriedly identified as crucial to keeping everything going. Individuals in low-paid and often stigmatised roles, such as filling supermarket shelves, caring for the elderly or taking away our waste, suddenly found themselves lauded as 'key workers'. In the UK we started stepping outside our doors on Thursday evenings to clap for doctors and nurses and were soon clapping for *all* key workers. But that was then.

In March this year, our government announced that nurses would receive a pay rise of only 1 per cent — less than the rate of inflation, so essentially a pay cut. It has since ruled out any Covid-19 bonus to recognise their hard work and sacrifice. It seems our honour and respect for key workers was transitory and the value we placed on them was as low as it had always been.

A monetary value

Whether, and then how, society ascribes a monetary value to a life is always contentious, raising moral and ethical conundrums, yet we do it all the time — take life insurance, for instance. In the US, to assess whether safety regulations are worth the expenditure, a 'statistical life' is valued at $10 million (perhaps surprisingly, in a country where black lives in particular seem not to matter).

In the UK we 'ration' treatments available on the National Health Service by deciding whether or not they provide sufficient value in 'units of health' gained, relative to cost, using a measure called the Quality-Adjusted Life Year. A QALY is equal to one year in perfect health and treatments are currently considered cost-effective, and so made available, if they fall below the rough threshold of £20-30,000 per QALY. That's one way of saying what a good-quality *single* year of life is worth but it's a statistical average, applying to everyone yet nobody specifically.

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The most obvious way in which we put a value on a life in the real world is through the amount we pay for a person's labour and there are vast differences in the amount that we think people are worth in those terms. The current hourly minimum wage in the UK is equivalent to a monthly income of just under €1,600, while the top 1 per cent earn at least €15,500 — almost a ten-fold difference. And while some would certainly argue that higher incomes are rewards for skills, knowledge, talent and hard work, it's hard to square this with the *social* value of the contributions of different occupations.

The relationship between salary and value

In 2009, in the wake of the global financial crisis, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) had a go at calculating the value to society of different jobs. Instead of looking only at how much people were paid in different occupations, it attempted to put a number on the social, environmental and economic value of six different jobs: a hospital cleaner, a recycling plant worker, a childcare worker — all of these low-paid — and a City banker, an advertising executive and a tax accountant — all highly remunerated.

The low-paid jobs generated £7-12 of benefits to society for every £1 paid out in wages, while the high-paid roles *destroyed* £7-47 of social value for every £1 in value they generated (the tax accountants were the worst offenders). Clearly, we could find examples of low-paid work that is socially and environmentally destructive, and highly paid work that is beneficial, but NEF's report illustrated an important point and busted a number of myths around pay and value. And it drew policy recommendations — from ending the silence on high pay to more progressive taxation.

Yet it seems no progress has been made. When the financial crisis shone a light on the excess salaries and bonuses in the finance sector, it felt as if public opinion would apply enough pressure for change. But here we are, ten years on, and inequality is rising: we clapped for the key workers but we didn't protect their livelihoods. We count the Covid-19 deaths and we talk about building back better, but we're at serious risk of getting more of the same.

How long will it be before we see a more honest and just reward — in money and respect — for the lives and the labour that keep us all afloat? Income inequality tramples roughshod over the idea that everyone is of equal worth and entitled to equal recognition.

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