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## Beware the medicalisation of loneliness

Loneliness was recently described in *The Lancet* as a public health problem that needs to be solved by the medical community.<sup>1</sup> We believe that the medicalisation of loneliness in this way is damaging, especially at a time when the issue is making its way into public understanding.

In 2010, a meta-analysis by Holt-Lunstad and colleagues demonstrated that, in terms of mortality risk, social disconnection is comparable to established risk factors such as smoking.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Jo Cox—a UK Member of Parliament—propelled loneliness into the political spotlight. Cox formed an independent, cross-party Commission of Members of Parliament and charities to collaborate on the issue. Upon her tragic murder, the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was progressed to “turbo-charge our response to loneliness”.<sup>3</sup> In January, 2018, the UK announced its first Minister for Loneliness.<sup>4</sup>

Loneliness is a unifying issue. People working in areas of employment, gender violence, youth suicide, crime, community safety, ageing, mental health and wellbeing, housing, education, violent extremism, immigration, transport, digital technology, and cyber security are all concerned about loneliness and social isolation. There is a unique opportunity to drive change widely and collectively to this population-wide concern, because work in various areas is coalescing at the same time as a political window of opportunity is open.

The medicalisation of social issues has not worked in the past. From obesity to HIV/AIDS, health researchers and practitioners are fighting—with limited success—to

convince society that public health problems require integrated and holistic approaches. Medicalisation of loneliness will discourage the collaboration needed, and medicine probably has no effective instruments with which to singlehandedly address the absence of human connection.

We declare no competing interests.

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- 1 Cacioppo JT, Cacioppo S. The growing problem of loneliness. *Lancet* 2018; **391**: 426. [\[Prod: Please link\]](#)
- 2 Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Med* 2010; **7**: e1000316.
- 3 Cox J. Commission on loneliness: a call to action. [https://www.jocoxloneliness.org/pdf/a\\_call\\_to\\_action.pdf](https://www.jocoxloneliness.org/pdf/a_call_to_action.pdf) (accessed March 7, 2018).
- 4 Prime Minister's Office. Press release: PM commits to government-wide drive to tackle loneliness. Jan 17, 2018. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-commits-to-government-wide-drive-to-tackle-loneliness> (accessed Feb 4, 2018).