

“Attempts to extend radically the human lifespan should be welcomed not feared”

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How long would you like to live for? Would you like to live to be over 100 years old and able to play with your great-great-grandchildren? Can you imagine spending as long in retirement as you did in work? Can you imagine living in a neighbourhood where two-thirds of your neighbours are over 65?

When we think about having an extended lifespan, there are three vital questions we should consider. The first is how *long* we want to live, i.e. how many ‘extra’ years. The second is *how* we want to live during these extra years, i.e. how many ‘good’ extra years. The third is whether society is ready to welcome the extension of the human lifespan at the population level, for example the majority of people at your local park, shop or swimming pool being older people.

The evidence of continuously rising life expectancy in our society is really exciting. Life expectancy has been rising, as a result of biological reasons, but also because technology can prevent or delay the onset of diseases. Based on 2006-8 data, a woman in the UK can expect to live almost 82 years on average, while a man can expect to live about 77 years (Ref: www.statistics.gov.uk). In contrast, at the turn of the 20th century the average life expectancy was 50 for women and 46 for men. In 1911 there were only 100 people in the UK who were centenarians (people aged 100 years or above). In 2007 there were over 9,000 centenarians (so it’s not surprising that the Queen’s press office stated that receiving a telegram from the Queen on your 100th birthday can no longer be guaranteed).

Secondly, we need to think whether the ‘extra’ years are good years, in terms of having good health, being able to participate in activities and getting the most out of enjoying life. Although life expectancy has been rising, healthy life expectancy has been rising more slowly, which means that the number of ‘extra’ years that we can expect to spend in poor health is increasing. For example, in 2004 women could expect to spend on average 70 of their 82 years in good health, whereas men could expect to spend 68 of those 77 years in good health. Would you change your mind about living beyond 100 years if for a number of those years you would be likely to be restricted by poor health?

Finally, are we ready, as a society, to welcome the radical extension of the human lifespan? Demographic changes mean that the age structure of our society has changed. In other words, the number of people belonging to each age group and the proportion of older people in our society increases as well. In 1900, less than five per cent of the UK population was over 65 years old, today that proportion is about 16 per cent, and by 2040 we can expect one-quarter of our population to be over 65 (Ref: www.statistics.gov.uk).

An extension of the human lifespan at the collective level can create wonderful opportunities but also challenges for policy-makers. On the one hand, older people contribute to life in so many ways, through volunteering in their community or caring for their grand-children. On the other hand, we have to be prepared as a society to adjust our physical environment and for our welfare state to accommodate the needs of a growing proportion of older persons. One example would be ensuring that all buses are

easily accessible to older people or by spending a larger proportion of the welfare budget on old-age pensions.

In thinking about this issue, perhaps we can learn from Jeanne Calment, the oldest person ever to have lived. Jeanne was born in Paris and lived for 122 years and 164 days (Ref: www.wikipedia.org). At age 85 she took up fencing and at 100 she continued to ride a bicycle. She stopped smoking at the age of 115, and said that her longevity was due to a diet of olive oil and about one kilogramme of chocolate every week. At the age of 90, Jeanne signed a deal with her then 47-year old lawyer to sell him her flat in return for a monthly sum until her death. Unfortunately for her lawyer, Jeanne went on to outlive him, leaving his widow to continue the monthly payments and collecting a total amount which was more than double the original value of her flat. Jeanne clearly thought not only about the 'how long' question of her lifespan, but also about the 'how well'. So the critical question for debate isn't just 'how long' you think you will live for, but also 'how well'.

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