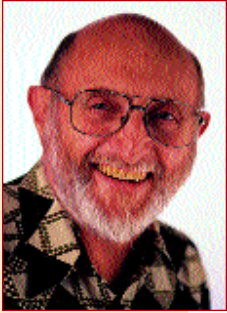


# Editor's comment

## The closing years



As I approach retirement, the realisation sets in that not only the end of my working life is nearing, but also the end of life — period. My wife is likely to survive me for a number of years, and one of the fears that beset my soul is that once I've gone, she will be faced with medical problems and that quality treatment will not be easily available or not be available at all. This is buttressed by the media reporting on the expected pressures of HIV/AIDS on hospital capacity, the effects of inflation on hospital and medical costs, the ever-increasing costs of membership of medical aid societies, and now the possibility that one may not be able to choose the hospital one attends for treatment of chronic ailments. Added to all of this is the erosion of the value of pensions as a result of inflation. Many of the elderly are therefore faced with mounting health and financial problems at a time when they should be able to relax and enjoy the 'golden years'. Apart from that, one's cognitive functions naturally deteriorate with age, and while some are lucky enough to have their mental acuity untouched by advancing years, what of those whose mental abilities are hindered by the heaviness of years?

The solution of course is to start planning young, and to look after one's health from an early age. The problem is that when it comes to pension or estate planning, youngsters generally say 'There's plenty of time'. And when it comes to health, many feel invulnerable and indulge in sport as their defence against illness. The former is a total misconception, and as I look back now I realise that it is never too early to start financial planning, but most of us do it incorrectly. The trouble is that during the early years one does not have much to invest, and one is loath to put money where it can't be touched in case one wants a new car, home entertainment centre or trip abroad. With regard to sport, an

item in a newspaper states that young, serious sportsmen stand a much greater chance of developing bone and joint problems in later years than those who don't take part in sport. This is borne out by personal observations, and how many of us don't have friends who played first team rugby or squash, who limp around because of knee and hip osteoarthritis, or have had replacements of these joints?

So what is my point?

The human being is a frail creature and is heir to many assaults, both from within and without. It should, therefore, be part of every child's early education to be aware of the dangers awaiting them, to equip them with the knowledge of how to avert the consequences of these dangers, and the determination to implement the actions stemming from that knowledge. This course in life skills should start in primary school, because once a child reaches high school it is too late. Included in this training should be advice from medical sources, ideally primary care physicians, on personal hygiene, physical fitness without engendering injury, cholesterol, hypertension, obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, psychological fitness and so forth. From the non-medical side, areas such as courtesy and fellow-feeling, obeying rules, respect for authority (but not willy-nilly acceptance) and financial planning, could be included. This should be an ongoing programme which starts in pre-school and continues well into the high school years.

Perhaps if a programme such as this is started now, we may have hope for our country for the next generation. But in the meantime, those who lacked this type of knowledge are now at a disadvantage, and many are suffering badly.

**Fred N Sanders**

It is published monthly  
South African Medical  
Association Health and  
Medical Publishing  
Private Bag X1, Pinelands,  
7430 (Incorporated  
association not for gain.  
Reg. No. 05/00136/08).

Correspondence for CME  
should be addressed to the  
editor at the above address.

Tel. (021) 530-6520  
Fax (021) 531-4126  
publishing@samedical.org

Head Office:  
Private Bag 74789, Lynwood  
Ridge, 0040  
Tel. (012) 481-2000  
Fax (012) 481-2100