

Editor's comment

A long life and a healthy life



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This issue of *CME* is about elderly medicine – called geriatrics when I was a student. Elderly medicine is often regarded as the care of frail, old people, with multiple pathologies, poor cognition and an increasingly poor quality of life. But, as many populations in the world age, it is becoming clear that this picture of old age could become outdated.

My involvement in running and cycling over the past few years has introduced me to many, many older people who are still fit, healthy and very active. An 83-year-old friend – a former cardiologist – still cycles The Argus faster than I have ever managed. He wins his age group every year. A 75-year-old member of my running club still regularly runs marathons – and leaves me standing in the weekly 5 km time trials. People are starting to age better and I think that it is as much mental attitude as the wonders of modern medicine that is allowing this.

In the UK, where the population is very grey, government is considering raising the age of retirement and so the age at which people can claim a pension, because people are living longer. Companies are

also starting to recognise that, while a person in their 60s or 70s may not want to work a full day, he or she still has plenty to offer – and it's not just vast experience, but the benefit of a well-ordered and disciplined mind. At the same time, there is increasing evidence to show that simply staying physically and mentally active as you age will prevent many of the worst aspects of ageing. Use it or lose it does seem to be the case.

Last year, *New Scientist* featured an article that looked at the evidence for how to age well. There were several interesting ideas. Apparently there is research to suggest that small doses of stressors, such as poisons, radiation and heat are good for you – sunburn, an X-ray, a couple of beers. Stressors, it seems, can kick-start natural repair processes and if the damage is not too severe, this can overcompensate, leading to repair of unrelated damage as well.

Don't live alone. Sociable people live longer and healthier lives than people who prefer their own company and the biggest longevity boost comes from marriage or an equivalent. Social contact appears

to boost development of the brain and immune system, giving better health.

Enjoy your vices. Chocolate, wine and sleep are all linked with health and so longevity. And pleasure itself seems to be good for you, so if you have a vice, enjoy it. Smiling also seems to contribute to longevity. Studies of centenarians have consistently found them to be people who enjoy a laugh, are gregarious and fun to be with. Use your brain – there are many studies that show that high intelligence, good education, literacy and high-status work protect people against the mental decline of old age.

And if you are absolutely determined to reach a ripe old age, re-locate. There are plenty of longevity hotspots around the world, where the number of people aged 100 or over is more than 10 in 100 000. No one is quite sure why.

The bottom line for healthy ageing seems to come down to four factors: diet, exercise, psycho-spiritual and social. So enjoy your life and anticipate a healthy old age – if you are not already there.

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