

## HEALTHY AGEING – A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## ABSTRACT

Getting old is a blissful act which people should celebrate because there are many who will not be able to enjoy their life till 60 years of age. But unfortunately people are scared of getting old in our society. It is because of lot of negative biological and social outcomes attached with the old age. Medical advancement and technological up gradation has shifted the scenario for negative biological implications of aging process, now people can look younger in their 80's too. But the main fear for aging lies in stereotypes, discrimination and taboos which are deep rooted in our society and effect the outlook of an aged as well as young person towards Old age. Healthy aging is again a subjective connotation which depends on the perception of an individual towards his physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being which can be attained in isolation. Therefore healthy aging is a social responsibility and every society should be prepared to support his older citizens with positive and supportive environment.

**KEYWORDS:** Healthy Ageing, Successful Ageing, Life Style, Physical Activity, Social Support

In the last century the longevity of the human life has increased tremendously. The resultant change in the population profile has left many people living to a very long age. The natural corollary of living long is getting old. Getting old is associated with the declining adaptability of the organism to various stresses and increases the chances of mortality [1]. Therefore ageing is described as a progressive deterioration of the physical and mental functions after the growth period is over.

All of us do not age the same way. A man of 60 may look like 70, and another the same age may look like 50. This is not only because of the differences in the genetic make up but it also depends on their nutrition, psychological stress, lifestyle, socioeconomic status, and the surrounding environment during the developmental period [2]. Health is very important for ensuring healthy ageing and maintaining the older population in a reasonably satisfactory state of existence. Health may be regarded as a balance of physical, mental and social aspects of life in a being. According to WHO "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" [3].

In general terms health can be assessed by how effectively and successfully a person functions. Feeling capable and competent; being able to handle normal levels of stress, maintain satisfying relationships, and lead an independent life; and being able to «bounce back,» or recover from difficult situations, are all signs of mental health. Therefore, all emotional, physical, and social aspects must function together to achieve overall health. The LaLonde report suggested that there are four general determinants of health including human biology, environment, lifestyle, and healthcare services [4]. Thus, health is maintained

and improved not only through the advancement and application of health science, but also through the efforts and intelligent lifestyle choices of the individual and society.

**What is Healthy Ageing?**

Active and healthy ageing has been considered as the goal of life by the United Nations and the World Health Organization. Healthy ageing describes the ongoing activities and behaviors you undertake to reduce the risk of illness and disease and increase your physical, emotional and mental health. It also means combating illness and disease with some basic lifestyle realignment that can result in a faster and more enduring recovery. If 90 years is regarded as the approximate target terminal age for the older persons, it implies that to keep older people reasonably healthy for at least 30 years, in spite of the continuing biological decline.

**Factors influencing Healthy Ageing**

What factors affect the physical, mental and social health of the older persons? What made a person to look like 70 in his 60 years of age? What made a person to pray for his death day?

Biological diseases and disabilities: Ageing is not a disease; it is a slow process through which an adult individual gradually passes with predictable biological decline. The ageing process which is inevitable for all is always associated with a decline in physiological function, which ultimately leads to various types of morbidity. This functional decline varies from one individual to another in a significant manner [5]. Almost all body functions such as cardiac performances, respiratory and renal functions, sensory faculties, nerve impulses conduction, muscle strengthened ability to maintain coordinated muscular effort, all of which may structural and functional

changes [6, 7]. Chronic diseases exact a particularly heavy health and economic burden on older adults due to associated long-term illness, diminished quality of life, and greatly increased health care costs.

**Societal/Environmental:** Ageing is accompanied by inevitable physical, biological, emotional, intellectual and personality changes. Most of the changes occurring in old age are small in magnitude but combined together, they have several different effects. Caring for the old parents is no longer due to high emotional attachment but it is more or less due to duty, social pressure and legal bindings. The breaking down of joint family system, selfishness, lack of adjustment, refusal to compromise and with more and younger women entering the work spree, care and attention given to elderly persons is becoming difficult. In the present context there is a lack of energy, time, patience and manpower to attend to elder frail persons.

**Life style:** Longevity in general is related to the ways of living, eating, drinking and smoking habits, socioeconomic and psychosocial factors, all grouped under the broad heading of life styles [8]. The various diseases that are related to life styles and are thus preventable thereby bear a close relationship with the longevity are- coronary artery disease, hypertension, lung cancer, obesity, gall stones, osteoarthritis and diabetes.

The tripod of life style consists of nutrition (including alcohol intake), physical activity (sedentary or active living habits) and role of mind (breathing, meditation, yoga and biofeedback). The excess intake of calories, saturated fats and refined carbohydrates and lack of complex carbohydrates in diet are responsible for higher occurrence of coronary heart disease and certain forms of cancer. For centuries physical exercise has been considered to promote health in general and prevent cardiovascular and metabolic disorders like diabetes and obesity. But older people are not aware of nutritional diet, importance of exercise and physical activity in their life [9].

**Psychological Aspects:** Healthy Ageing includes a satisfying quality of life: a key factor in achieving this is maintenance of the ability to engage with one's community in a meaningful way. A major fear in the elderly is loss of this key human facility, and with it, loss of independence and the ability to make important decisions. The psychological health of the older people decline with their physical health [10]. The economic dependence, burden of costly long time health care, isolation, low status in family and society, feeling of helplessness and worthless bring down the level of self efficacy, quality of life, and

life satisfaction. As a result there is an increasing complaint of depression in old age [11].

**Education and occupation:** The elderly population will be confronted with socioeconomic deprivation and compromised health because large sections of the elderly people are uneducated and depend on others for their survival [12]. Society should come forward to meet the education, training and information needs of the older persons. Educational programs should incorporate materials to strengthen inter-generational bonds and mutually supporting relationships. Interaction with educational institutions will be facilitated whereby older persons with professional qualifications and knowledge in science arts, environment, socio-cultural heritage, sport and other areas could interact with children and young persons. Schools and society should be encouraged and assisted to develop outreach programs for interacting with the older persons on a regular basis, participating in the running of senior citizens' centers and develop activities in them.

### Why to live healthy in old age?

**Speed of population ageing:** The number of older persons has tripled over the last 50 years; it will be more than triple again over the next 50 years. In 1950 only three countries had more than 10 million people 60 or older - China (42 million), India (20 million) and the United States of America (20 million). In 2000 the number of countries with more than 10 million people aged 60 or over increased by 12, including 5 with more than 20 million older people - China, India, United States of America, Japan and Russian Federation. Over the first half of the century, the global population 60 or over is projected to expand by more than three times to reach nearly 2 billion in 2050.

**Burden of disease:** The aged population is vulnerable to many acute diseases such as infection, vascular events and accidents; chronic diseases such as hypertension, cataract, heart disease, chronic bronchitis, diabetes, degenerative arthritis, depression, stroke, enlargement of prostate, cancers and functional GI disorders; disabilities such as and other health related problem such as physical dependence, stroke, osteoporosis & fracture, heart failure, and dementia [13]. However heart attack, stroke and cancer are the killers, disabling and costly to treat, these are potentially preventable and require more attention from the health care system.

**Feminization of ageing:** Feminization of ageing is evident from the significantly higher number of older women aged 80+ than men. In 2000, the ratio was

1,720 females to just 1,000 males, and eight out of ten of these old-old women were widowed. The women's longer life expectancy is a contributing factor to the sex ratio in their favor. Physical frailty and disability occur naturally with older ages, and the report shows that women with disabilities outnumber men significantly [14, 15]. Statistically, women among the semi-ambulant and non-ambulant elderly aged 65 and above outnumbered men by almost twice in 2000. In absolute numbers, there were a total of 17,270 older women in both categories compared to only 8,580 men in 2000, it is estimated that 51% of the elderly population would be women by the year 2016.

### Ageing 'Usual' or 'Successful'

There are two aspects of ageing one is 'usual' and another is 'successful' ageing. Usual ageing is associated with diseases, disabilities, loss of function and fitness, lack of social and economic productivity. However the successful ageing can be predicted through the ability to meet basic self-care needs independently, high level of self efficacy and high feelings of achievement and satisfaction.

### Role of society in health promotion of aged

It is the responsibility of the society to ensure that population remains healthy as it ages. Indian traditional and religious teaching demands that children would take care of their parents in old age. However, economic considerations, dual careers, migration and individualism have contributed to a decline in this system. As a result there is an increasing trend among older people to live independent of their children, in spite of their diseases, disabilities and economic restraints. They are helpless and need the helping hand of the society for their survival and to raise their status.

Social determinants of health are the economic and social conditions under which people live determine their health. Virtually all major diseases are primarily determined by specific exposures to these conditions. These 11 social determinants of health are: Aboriginal status, early life, education, employment and working conditions, food security, gender, health care services, housing, income and its distribution, social safety net, social exclusion, unemployment and employment security [16].

Old is considered synonymous with physical and cognitive decline, disease and disability, financial insolvency, burden to the family, conservatism and a misfit in the mainstream society. But there were days when they were treated with dignity, respect and as storehouse of wisdom whose advice was sought. Does

this mean that old age is all liabilities and there are no means by which, in contemporary times, the services of the older people can be utilized for the benefit of the community?

The United Nations has declared Year 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers to address the important contribution of the older persons in the community [17]. Voluntary work is indispensable not just for the community, but also offers older people who have retired a possibility to find a new source for self-realization. The demographic changes, with all their challenges for health and social systems, the pensions system, care and family policy, the economy and education, require a clear avowal of an active and positive design of the social framework. Ageing in good health while leading a self-determined life and being fully integrated in society is a perspective we have to open up for an ever-increasing number of people.

Elder persons make innumerable contributions to their families, societies and economies. The notion that the elderly do not or cannot contribute to development is a myth. Support of the older generation is vital for the overall growth of our country, and in turn, they will need our practical assistance in providing moral support and care. Society should encourage families to develop and nurture a culture of reciprocal assistance to enable all age groups to contribute to national development efforts. All countries should address ageing in line with their national conditions, take full account of the needs of older persons and incorporate ageing into their economic and social development programs for good nutrition and nutritious food [9], physical exercise to tone up the body and improve fitness [18], awareness of the principles of mental health [19] and their practice in day to day life (meditation and yoga) [20], strategies of motivation, support for basic needs of sustenance, immunization, availability of physical and emotional support, prevent the excessive intake of smoking and alcohol [21] and provision for scope for personal growth within the limits of physical activities [22, 23]. Proactive measures to protect the rights of older persons and enhance their quality of life constitute an important responsibility of governments and societies worldwide, so that they can, as far as possible, participate in an active social life and realize their spiritual potential.

Ageing takes places within a social context. The bond between adult children and parents is usually identified as intergenerational relationship. It is associated with positive sentiments of love, respect, appreciation, and the feeling of attachment people have for one another. Society can promote orphanages managed by older widows/widowers, multigenerational housing schemes with intergenerational cooperation,

mutigenerational schools and self help groups, which are sustainable by self. This would entail promoting physical fitness, postponing or averting the early onset of degenerative changes, promoting cognitive efficiency and improving overall functional competence of the older persons [24].

The extent to which an older person is enmeshed within a social network of kin, friends and neighbors will greatly affect his experience of ageing. A social support system is a pattern of continuous and/or intermittent ties and interchanges of mutual assistance that plays a significant role in maintaining the physical, social and psychological integration of the individual over time. A good social support network can fulfill the needs of the socialization, carrying out the activities of daily living and personal assistance during time of crisis of the older people can turn usual ageing into successful ageing [22, 25, 26].

Our elders represent a bond between the present and the past of all of us. The great challenge ahead is to offer all ageing persons a society in which they can develop their human potential. Older persons can be confident that their future is in good hands, in the hands of young people, in the hands of the future older persons.

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