Senescence By the Numbers

The psalmist declared plaintively: "Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth." The Roman poet Horace, who barely lived to 57 years, spoke eloquently of a golden age opening before humans as they trespass into the senior years. Somewhere, between the psalmist's despair and Horace's benevolent vision of a senior's years, there must exist a less poetic materiality of what life beyond age 80 is truly like. These are the elders that demographers refer to as "the oldest old."

Most elderly who dare to discuss candidly the quality of their lives, those who have made the weary pilgrimage to a state of varying decrepitude, tend to agree with William B. Yeats (1865 – 1939):

> What shall I do with this absurdity –
> O heart, O troubled heart – this caricature,
> Decrepit age that has been tied to me
> As to a dog's tail?

Most humans are too preoccupied with a multitude of impediments, leaving them with little time to reflect upon the larger social dimensions of aging or to offer any expansive vision of trends in aging. But fortunately the United Nations and its Department of Economic and Social Affairs periodically provides us with global statistics on aging.

We learn, for example, that currently there are 737 million humans, world-wide, who are 60 years of age or older. And further, that this number will increase to two billion by the year 2050. By that year, 40 years hence, the number of elderly will outnumber the global youth (those 14 years or younger) for the first time in recorded history. The elderly, today, constitute 11% of the global population. By the year 2050, this will increase to 22%.

The oldest old, those 80 years of age or older, now number 103.2 million. The number of centenarians, those living to age 100 years and beyond, now number 454,000; by 2050 they will number 4.1 million souls. Not long ago a person reaching age 100 justified a front-page news story.

By various standards, and certainly by biological realities, males are more fragile than females. Currently, for every 100 living females there are 83 living males. In the year 2050, despite anticipated advances in medicine, there will only be 59 males for every 100 living females. In those nations where selective illiteracy, restrictive standards and poverty combine selectively to depress female health, the ratio of males to females is approximately equal.

And, for those reaching age 60 years, what is their life expectancy? For males world-wide, it is 18 years; for females worldwide, 21 years. But these global averages hide the immense and troublesome disparities between the wealthy and impoverished nations. In Japan, for example, the average 60-year old woman may expect to live an additional 28 years. In some west African nations, a sixty-year old woman may anticipate, on average, only 10 more years.

What else may we distill from this mountain of statistics? Since there is a discrepancy between male and female longevity, more elderly women than elderly men may be expected to live alone. This is borne out by statistics. Globally, about 9% of males older that 60 live alone. More than twice as many women, 19%, over the age of 60 now live alone (in L'Enclos' words: "Old age is woman's hell."). And does it matter in which nation one lives? In the poorer nations, a substantially *smaller* percent of the elderly live alone. Thus in the subSaharan nations the percent of elderly males living alone is about 6% and for elderly females, 11%. This may be interpreted variously as indicating that the poorer nations are more family-oriented, more concerned with their grandparents and therefore less likely to abandon them. Or, alternatively, that the poorer nations are too impoverished to build independent assisted-living facilities for their elderly.

Cicero (106-43 BCE) called old age "the crown of life, our play's last act." But neither the Romans, nor those who followed in the succeeding 19 centuries, lived much beyond age 60. Our knowledge of such burdens as Alzheimer's disease is only one century old. Old age, for many, is no longer that golden interval when one may reflect upon the privileges of seniority while admiring the antics of one's grandchildren. Old age becomes a haven surrounded by peril where identity and cognition may depart prematurely. And when contemplating the fundamentals of old age, back again to Horace: "Grant me sound of body and of mind, to pass an old age lacking neither honor nor lyre." And Seneca, his colleague (8 BCE – 65) declaring: "Old age is an incurable disease."

– Stanley M. Aronson, MD

Stanley M. Aronson, MD is dean of medicine emeritus, Brown University.

Disclosure of Financial Interests

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Correspondence
e-mail: SMAMD@cox.net