

Ageing positively for New Zealanders

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With improvements in hygiene, health care, education and equality, millions worldwide have reaped the benefits of good health and longevity in life expectancy. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated the average life expectancy of a child born in 2013 to be 71 years, and 77 years if they live in a developed country.¹ In New Zealand, a child born in the same year is expected to live until their 90th birthday.² The gap between women and men, and also between different ethnic groups, has also improved in recent statistical analyses for the same cohort.

Health expectancy has also improved. It is predicted that about 85% of New Zealanders will continue to enjoy good health until their final days.³ Despite longevity in life, ischaemic heart disease, cerebrovascular disease and diabetes continue to have a major impact.⁴ Suicide and malignancy also compete for the major causes of death in New Zealand. Lifestyle choices continue to predict cause of death, although modern medicine has assisted in improving life and health expectancy. People want to live longer 'eating, drinking and being merry', and death from these lifestyle choices is still an undesired outcome.

The 2014 New Zealand General Social Survey⁵ shed interesting light on the issue of positive ageing. This survey found that people aged over 65 years are more likely to provide higher ratings than younger people in life satisfaction and sense of purpose, giving them a better sense of wellbeing and improved health outcomes. This brings us to the question of the health and wellbeing of younger people. Conceivably, the social situation of young people has a strong effect on their perception of life satisfaction and sense of purpose, especially when the support and structure required to live simply in the 21st century seems to be lacking. For example, it is common for a middle-aged person to need to balance the demands of

self-care, family, work and financial commitments while maintaining healthy lifestyles and satisfactory mental health. However, attending to this balance in the corporate era is now particularly problematic, especially for those with little family or social support. Difficulties in achieving such balance will affect both the physical and mental wellbeing of the middle-aged person, and can negatively affect the process of ageing positively.

Perhaps the process of ageing positively should really begin at birth, for an individual to be equally invested in all aspects of their life as a young child, adolescent, adult, and as an elderly person. Supports for positive ageing are not limited to what is available in the health sector (health promotion, education, prevention and management), but also depend on the wider social environment—law and education, nutrition, fitness, housing and others.

Managing the health of New Zealanders continues to be a great balancing act that requires great care. However, perhaps the focus should now be shared more evenly across all age groups. Such a balance will hopefully lead to improved overall health and social outcomes in New Zealand.

References

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