

## **Apocalypse No, the Myth of Aging and a Health Care Crisis** Hamilton Spectator and Straight Goods – August 9, 2002

**By Dr. Gordon Guyatt**

Everyone knows that the aging of our population will lead to catastrophic demands on our health care system, right?

Wrong.

But our population is aging, isn't it? Yes, it's true that today 13% of Canadians are over 65. By 2031 the proportion will rise to 22% as baby boomers join the elderly population.

Nevertheless, the popular belief that the aging population will lead to a health care crisis is a myth. As it turns out, getting old doesn't, by itself, mean increased use of health resources. What causes increased health utilization is illness. The increasing elderly population is actually getting healthier.

Take my father, for instance. At age 77, he is still playing a vigorous game of squash. My step-mother, at 79, remains extremely active. Doris keeps a full social schedule, and still has the energy to babysit our two very active toddlers. Most important in terms of pressure on the health care system, Doris has no chronic illnesses. Her only medications are prescribed to prevent the heart disease and osteoporosis of which, up to now, she shows no sign.

My parents are typical of the changes in older North Americans over the last 20 years. Disability is strongly associated with health care costs, and residence in a nursing home is a straightforward measure of disability. Of Americans over 65, 5.4% were in nursing homes in 1985, and 4.6% in 1995, a drop of 15%.

A number of surveys have looked at dependence, the need for help with an activity. Whereas 25% of elderly Americans were dependent in 1984, only 19% were dependent in 1999. This translates in to a decline of almost 2% per year.

Two American surveys have measured functional limitations, such as

difficulty walking three blocks, climbing a flight of stairs, or using an object such as a pencil, as well as impairment in hearing and sight. Both surveys show rapid declines in functional impairment from 0.5% to 3.2% per year, depending on the measure and the survey.

Canadian surveys tell the same story. The proportion of Canadians over 75 receiving long-term nursing has dropped from 16% to 14% since the late 1970s. Over the past decade, life expectancy over 65 has grown by 1.1 years among men with about 70% of that increase without disability. The gain in life without disability in women, 0.8 years, has actually been greater than the gain in total life span of 0.6 years.

The evidence tells us that the elderly are already more healthy. The baby boomers will be even healthier. Major Canadian surveys reveal that the baby-boomer generation suffers from less heart disease, arthritis and limitations than previous generations.

Why is the older population so much healthier? Medical technologies can take some of the credit. For older people with osteoarthritis of the hip or knee, joint replacement represents a medical miracle. The number of joint replacements roughly doubled from the 1980s to the 1990s, allowing many elderly people to stay active. The proportion of persons having cataract surgery doubled as well. My father's cataract surgery helped keep him on the squash court.

Medication is also playing a part. For instance, aggressive treatment of high blood pressure is contributing to the decline in strokes, a very important cause of disability in the elderly. The principle here is very important: new health technologies can actually decrease overall health costs.

Health technologies can't take all the credit. Smoking rates have declined from about 40% in 1960 to 25% today. Smoking is associated with stroke, heart disease, and respiratory disease, all important causes of disability. Non-smoking elderly tend to stay healthier and more active, with less need for medical interventions.

Education is another important factor. Poorer people with less education have higher rates of illness and disability. The share of the elderly with some college education has doubled from the early 1980s to the late

1990s, and this change also contributes to the more healthy elderly population.

The second reason that the popular wisdom about the aging population and exploding health care costs is a myth is that, even aside from the decreasing disability, population aging has a limited impact on use of health services. Despite a higher proportion of elderly, for instance, the number of days Canadians spend in hospital has dropped by two thirds since 1970. Large increases in pharmaceutical costs are almost totally explained by more expensive medicines, with increased use by the elderly responsible for only a trivial part of the total.

In December 2000, the Canadian Institutes for Health Research reviewed the issue of the impact of aging on health care costs and concluded that "expenditure increases resulting from population growth and aging, by themselves, will be stable and relatively modest." Canadian health economist Robert Evans and his colleagues have exposed the aging myth in an article entitled "Apocalypse no: population aging and the future of health care systems." Given the data, the experts' conclusions should come as no surprise.

Unfortunately, the facts will not deter those who use the aging myth as a way of frightening us into thinking that we cannot afford high quality public health care. Canadian health care is more, not less, affordable than it was a decade ago. The aging of the Canadian population is not going to change that.