
BETTER DATA REVEAL BRIGHTER FUTURE

Besides improved health, productivity and other primary factors pointing to a brighter future than the fiscal doom-sayers depict for the aging American future, additional data present an even rosier potential for tomorrow. Following are some additional positive aspects of societal longevity:

Education levels: Other research has shown that education levels are associated with improved health and active life expectancy. Jack Guralnik of the National Institutes of Health showed in the early 1990s that at age 65, those with 12 or more years of education had an active life expectancy that was 2.4 to 3.9 years longer than that of people with less education. Moreover, federal data on education levels among older adults indicate a significant ongoing rise in the percentage of those with a high school diploma (23.5% in 1965 vs. 73.1% in 2004). In 1965, 5% of those at least age 65 had a bachelor's degree or more—a figure that jumped to 18.7% in 2004,

according to the federal government's interagency report *Older Americans: Key Indicators of Well-Being* (available at http://agingstats.gov/Agingstatsdotnet/Main_Site/Data/2006_Documents/OA_2006.pdf).

Geriatric medicine: In the United States, board certification in geriatric medicine dates back only to 1992. Specialization in geriatrics has had a noticeably positive effect on improved health with aging. The field is poised to make increasingly important contributions in the decades to come, especially with improved support for geriatric training, which is currently funded at appallingly low levels.

Research breakthroughs: In addition, significant federal research on aging dates back only to 1975, when the National Institute on Aging appointed Robert N. Butler as its first director. The promise here is great. A breakthrough in Alzheimer's disease research that would alter the course or delay the onset of the

disorder—apart from preventing it—could cut the related human and economic costs tremendously.

Civic engagement of elders: Also never considered by the doom-sayers are the powerful effects of creative engagement among elders. I conducted a controlled, multisite national study of older adults with an average age of 80, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Institutes of Health and AARP. The research, which I describe in my book *The Mature Mind. The Positive Power of the Aging Brain* (Basic Books, 2005), demonstrated that providing older adults with opportunities for creative engagement resulted in an actual improvement in overall health—including better mental health, fewer doctor visits and less medication use—when measured against a very well matched comparison group. Programs of this nature are rising rapidly in the 21st century. ♦

—Gene D. Cohen
