

MEMORANDUM

November 1, 2011

We are living longer – a lot longer -- and that can either encourage or frighten you. In this communication, William B. Dickinson gives a personal touch to the health and societal issues surrounding longevity. Now in his 81st year, Dickinson says he can understand the preoccupation of old folks with their health. “Friends, relatives and colleagues pass away on a regular basis,” Dickinson, a former Washington editor and journalism professor, writes. “Those of us who have temporarily outwitted the actuarial tables know all too well that we are moving up in the queue. Joints wear out, hearts flag, eyes dim, hearing fades, nerves fray and memory becomes unreliable.”

Dickinson is intrigued by a spate of predictions that living to age 100 will become increasingly common. One demographer associated with Duke University believes that if we continue making progress in reducing mortality, “most children born since the year 2000 will live to see their 100th birthday in the 22nd century.” The Census Bureau estimates that there were only 2,300 centenarians in the United States in 1950, and 79,000 in 2010. But that number could jump to 601,000 by 2050. Better medical care and rising living standards accounted for most of the increased life expectancy in the 20th century.

In the future, however, progress in longevity will be fueled in part by a deeper understanding of genetics and the root causes of aging in humans and other species. Breakthrough work in immunology and tissue engineering also figure into the calculations. Some observers believe that a longer span of healthy years will lead to greater wealth and prospects for happiness. Others believe that our unwillingness to face death means that we will spend our nation into bankruptcy to extend life for a few more sickly months.

“This is the beginning of a debate that surely will convulse the political system for decades,” Dickinson concludes. “Those of us on the cusp of eternity have been thinking about the implications for a long time. Is the decision to hasten an end to life a personal matter or one of public policy? Our growing population – now 312 million heading to 400 million in just 40 years – will strain public and private health resources. If the swelling cadre of centenarians becomes a drain on the public purse, and on family finances, we may not throw grandpa under the train. But we won’t want him lingering too long, either.”

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