

MEDIA RELEASE

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Long life vs healthy life: How many 'good' years do we have?

We are getting older by the second, but we are also living for longer. Recent estimates have found that life expectancy is increasing by 1 year every 4 years.

Visiting international expert Professor Carol Jagger will today address the gap between leading a long life and leading a healthy one at a seminar hosted by the ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research (CEPAR) in Canberra.

"Most of the recent increase in longevity comes from improvements in life expectancy in the older years. That is, assuming mortality rates as they currently are, an average Australian male born today can expect to live 80 years. If the current trend of increases in life expectancy continues, we can expect someone born in twenty years' time to live until 85," Professor Jagger said.

However, life expectancy numbers are not the full story of our ever increasing age. "The real story is in discerning disability-free or healthy life expectancy (HLE)," Professor Jagger, the UK's foremost researcher in this area, said. This week's visit is designed to help Australian researchers achieve that.

"As the projections of life expectancy continue to increase, the healthy life expectancy projections in many European countries remain flat, and in some these are even decreasing, which paints a rather grim view of the gains being made in longevity," Professor Jagger said.

"As the population aged 65 and over continues to grow, in both proportion and size, the number of healthy years we have has very important implications for many aspects of population ageing policy," Professor Jagger said.

"It will affect the cost of the aged care and health systems and health insurance schemes and also has ramifications for any intentions governments may have to raise pension access ages.

"Our research findings show that the current cohorts of very old people are largely being cared for by their children. As the population dynamic changes, policy makers need to examine whether they are double counting their workforce resources.

"Is it realistic to ask the people caring for our aged population to do so while simultaneously encouraging them to remain in the workforce?"

Professor Jagger said researchers and policy makers are in uncharted territory with regard to understanding life expectancy and healthy life expectancy projections.

“Researchers are essentially trying to predict the future based on what we know today. It has taken time to develop a good measure of healthy life expectancy. Determining appropriate interventions to improve the gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy is the next frontier in HLE research.

“If the gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy continues to get larger, the impact on health and social services will be significant. Until we have a better understanding of interventions that can be put in place to improve healthy life expectancy, planning needs to begin to address the things we do know: we will have greater numbers of older people, with varying degrees of health, that will need to be cared for by a smaller number of younger people who will be working longer.”

“In time, this research into HLE will help inform governments on better targeted funding arrangements and policy directions. Workshops like the one hosted by CEPAR are an important step in developing the research knowledge to provide these insights,” Professor Jagger said.

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