



26 Feb 2015  
Age, Melbourne

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**health** michelle hamer

# Seven score and ten ... Hockey's own goal on longevity

**J**oe Hockey says scientific advances could see humans live to 150, but not all scientists share such optimism.

The federal Treasurer made the prediction to justify budget cuts and greater health costs for Australians, claiming that "somewhere in the world today, it's highly probable that a child is being born that is going to live to 150".

Certainly humans are living longer. A recent United Nations report predicts a third of today's newborns could live to triple figures, and described population ageing as a "megatrend transforming economies and societies around the world".

The report says the number of centenarians will explode from current global figures of about 300,000, to more than 3 million by 2050, making centenarians the fastest-growing demographic globally.

Yet according to the Guinness Book of World Records, humans haven't yet managed to live beyond 122 years (with documented proof). Pushing the ageing envelope to 150 years is not expected any time soon, according to Hal Kendig, Professor of Ageing and Public Policy at the Australian National University.

Professor Kendig, who is also a chief investigator at the ARC Centre for Excellence in Population Ageing Research, says that while it is conceivable that people born today could live to 150, there's nothing in our current knowledge to indicate that such a breakthrough is going to happen soon.

"Our lives are getting longer, but it's more in the order of an additional five to 10 years," he says.

Australia now has more than 4000

centenarians (people aged 100 and older) and supercentenarians (aged 110 years or older), according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, with the number set to increase to 60,000 by 2050.

Australia's oldest person is believed to be Ethel Farrell, a 112-year-old Victorian woman who was born in 1902 when Australians were fighting in the Boer War.

The good news for those hoping to emulate Ethel's impressive longevity is that not only are we living longer, we're also enjoying better health as we age.

A Harvard University Professor of Applied Economics, David Cutler, led a study that found people are experiencing healthier older age.

"Effectively, the period of time in which we're in poor health is being compressed until just before the end of life," Professor Cutler says.

"So where we used to see people who are very, very sick for the final six or seven years of their life, that's now far less common.

"People are living to older ages and we are adding healthy years, not debilitated ones."

A recent report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has similar findings. The report, *Healthy Life Expectancy in Australia: Patterns and Trends 1998 to 2012*, found that not only had life expectancy for newborn boys increased by four years between 1998 and 2012, Australian men had also gained an impressive 4.4 years of disability-free life.

In the same time period newborn girls gained 2.8 years' life expectancy, with an extra 2.4 years of disability-free older life. So not only are our lives getting longer, we can also look forward to healthier old age – and this,



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according to Kendig, is the aim.

“Quality of life is much more important than longevity,” he says.

Older people don't want to live forever; they want to live well.

“Many things can be done to improve the health and wellbeing of people well into their 60s, 70s and 80s,” he says.

“Encouraging physical activity, good nutrition and an age-friendly Australia which recognises the humanity of older people, acknowledges their contributions and doesn't create artificial barriers to these contributions.”

According to Sue Hendy, CEO of Victoria's Council on the Ageing, age discrimination is a barrier to enjoyment of increased longevity.

“Governments paint ageing as a burden [that] drains the Treasury coffers,” Hendy wrote in a recent blog for the International Federation on Ageing.

“Our society continues to see old age as connected to decrepitude,” she said. “Chronological age and capacity appear to be linked in ... government dialogue. We need to separate these two elements and enable a conversation about participation by people in all aspects of life, irrespective of age.”

She said linking age with capacity was ageist and denied older people the opportunity for a life well lived.

Kendig says that as our lives grow longer, governments will face economic challenges and will need to find ways for older people to be independent and remain in the workforce as long as possible.

But as for budgeting for 150-year-olds, he suggests that even if such a lifespan does eventuate, it won't happen quickly and humans will have the next century to adapt to managing such longevity.



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**Treasurer Joe Hockey predicted humans living to 150 in order to justify his budget cuts.**