Why Call Aging a Disease?

A better chance for good health in our old age

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As science and technology continue to improve our standard of living, the human life span has increased dramatically. But for the most part, medicine has been unable to keep individuals from experiencing an inevitable decline in physical and cognitive health as they age.

In addition to deteriorating health, a longer-lived population faces dwindling financial resources that could eventually make folks a burden to families, communities, states and the country. What's the use of living longer if it's going to result in poorer quality of life for everyone?

Although becoming older is a natural process undergone by all living things, a growing number of scientists in the field of longevity research believe in classifying aging as a disease. Doing so, they say, would generate funding for research and incentivize pharmaceutical and biotech companies to develop drugs and other therapies for the prevention and treatment of this biological condition.

In 2018, scientists moved closer to this goal when the World Health Organization (WHO) accepted a proposal to include a code for age-related diseases in the International Classification of Diseases, the global standard for health information that defines diseases, disorders, injuries and other health conditions. The move signaled the WHO's acknowledgment of aging as a risk factor for major diseases.

Experts in aging research say scientific evidence seems to suggest that several fundamental processes are primarily responsible. They believe these findings offer hope that scientists may eventually be able to modify how humans age.

One drug, RTB101, is currently in clinical trials to test its potential to check the age-related decline of the immune system. (Researchers expect results for this antiaging intervention by mid-2020.) Should the findings lead to this medication's approval, doctors would be able to use the drug to prevent age-related diseases in humans.

Despite the excitement this prospect is generating, however, some scientists have expressed concerns that classifying aging as a disease could further fuel the stereotyping and stigmatization of older people. This very real problem can affect the health of seniors by weakening their will to live and their efforts to become and stay physically active and recover from illness. In addition, this increased stress can act to shorten their life span.

But it’s undeniable, too, that old age can trigger biological problems that render the body more susceptible to numerous harmful effects. For example, findings show a connection between aging and certain degenerative processes that can lead to osteoarthritis.

I do agree that ageism is an ongoing problem. But this bias will take time to erase. In the meantime, I think we should do what’s necessary to ensure that individuals remain independent and functional throughout all the stages of their lives. If classifying aging as a disease is required to produce positive results, then so be it.

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