

Health crisis looms as life expectancy soars

Western governments are drastically underestimating how long their citizens are likely to live, scientists warned last week. This oversight threatens to put strains on the health, welfare and pensions systems of the developed world far more serious than previously thought. Until recently the growing awareness that governments were living a lie over life expectancy was mostly confined to a small circle of specialist demographers. But the latest critique of scientific complacency on increasing average lifespans will be hard to ignore. For years scientists have been advising governments that the increases in life expectancy over the past century, which saw typical British male lifespans rise from 48 years in 1901 to 75 years in 2000, and those of females from 49 to 80 years, will not continue. In the journal *Science*, however, two scientists from Cambridge and Rostock in Germany state that life expectancy will go on increasing indefinitely.

By comparing differences in life expectancy between the world's wealthier countries, they conclude that as early as 2070 female life expectancy in the United States could be as high as 101 years. The official US forecast for 2070 is only 83.9 years. One of the scientists, James Vaupel of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, believes that a typical female baby born this year in France or Japan - the two countries with the greatest life expectancy - already has a 50/50 chance of living to be 100. The *Science* paper gives no estimates for Britain, but using the same methodology, female life expectancy in Japan would reach 100 in 2060, with Britain following in 2085. If true, the study has implications not just for pensions but for healthcare and

social services, since there is no guarantee that average healthspan - the time people are free of chronic illness - will keep pace with average lifespan. Government figures show that for men, life expectancy went up from 70.9 to 74.6 between 1981 and 1997, but healthy life expectancy went up from 64.4 to 66.9. In women, the healthy life expectancy increase lagged a year behind life expectancy.

A British MP welcomed the report. He called for an independent body to be set up, such as the monetary policy committee that sets interest rates, to fix increased retirement ages. "If you look at life expectancy in 1948 when the state pension was introduced, and take that as a reasonable length of time to receive a pension, you would have a retirement age of 74 today," he said. Dr Vaupel's co-author, Jim Oeppen, of Cambridge University's Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, said that at the moment the Government predicts British male life expectancy will rise from 75 to 79 and female from 80 to 83 by 2025. Yet Japan has already reached both these levels. "We have to strongly consider that current forecasts of the elderly are actually too low. Not only will the numbers be greater, but there will be more at the older end of the scale," he said. Life expectancy is an average figure. In the 1880s many people lived to their 60s and 70s, but almost a quarter of those born died before they were five. The maximum lifespan that any human being has lived is currently 122. During the 20th century a succession of scientists declared absolute limits to life expectancy. In 1928 the US demographer, Louis Dublin, said that it was unlikely to exceed 64.75 years. In 1990 Dublin's successors said that

without fundamental breakthroughs in controlling ageing itself, 50-year-olds could not expect to live for more than another 35 years. Six years later, however, life expectancy for Japanese women passed this figure. "The ignominious saga of life expectancy maxima is more than an exquisite case for historians intrigued by the foibles of science," write Oeppen and Vaupel. "The officials responsible for making projections have recalcitrantly assumed that life expectancy will increase slowly and not much further."

The official forecasts distort people's decisions about how much to save, and when to retire. They give politicians licence to postpone painful adjustments to social security and medical care systems." Professor Alan Walker of Sheffield University said the paper's conclusions were not news to him but, with the possible exception of Germany, were not yet being faced up to by governments. "Policy makers are now just beginning to recognise the potential significance of increased life expectancy."

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1. True or false

1. Life expectancy for men in Britain in 1901 was only 48 years.
2. In 2000 this had risen to 88 years.
3. By 2070, life expectancy in the USA could be as high as 110 years.
4. Female babies born this year in Japan have a 50/50 chance of reaching the age of 100.
5. By 2060 female life expectancy in Japan will reach 100 years.
6. To match increasing life expectancy, the retirement age in the UK should already be 74.
7. Japan has the highest life expectancy in the world.
8. In the 1880s nearly 25% of those born died before the age of 5.
9. The maximum lifespan that any human being has lived is 130.
10. Male life expectancy is higher than female life expectancy.

2. Find the answer

1. What was the life expectancy for males in Britain in 1901?
a. 60 b. 68 c. 48
2. What was the life expectancy for males in Britain in 2000?
a. 80 b. 75 c. 65
3. When is female life expectancy in the USA expected to be more than 100 years?
a. 2010 b. 2040 c. 2070
4. What chance has a female baby born this year in France or Japan of reaching the age of 100?
a. a 10% chance b. a 25% chance c. a 50% chance
5. In the 1880s what percentage of the population died before the age of 5?
a. 25% b. 35% c. 45%
6. What is the maximum current lifespan?
a. 110 b. 122 c. 129
7. What does a demographer study?
a. health b. population c. maps

3. Comprehension check

1. If governments drastically underestimate life expectancy, what is likely to happen?
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2. What is the main finding of the report by the scientists in Cambridge and Rostock?
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3. What is the definition of 'healthspan'?
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4. What change in the retirement age is being proposed by a British MP?
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5. How is life expectancy calculated?
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6. What is the result of errors in official forecasts?
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4. Vocabulary work

Match the following words with their meanings:

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|-----------------|--|
| 1. drastically | a. over-confidence |
| 2. oversight | b. fascinated |
| 3. complacency | c. a discovery or achievement that follows hard work |
| 4. demographer | d. a long story |
| 5. breakthrough | e. to an excessive degree |
| 6. ignominious | f. to delay or put back |
| 7. intrigued | g. likely to happen very soon |
| 8. imminent | h. shameful |
| 9. saga | i. a person who studies population features |
| 10. postpone | j. something forgotten or not noticed |

Use words from the text to fill the gaps in these sentences:

1. If you think something is smaller or less important than it really is, you _____ it.
2. If you _____ something, you do not consider it or pay attention to it.
3. Another word for 'richer' is _____.
4. A _____ is a kind of prediction.
5. An _____ is a possible effect or result.
6. If an illness is very serious, it can be described as _____.
7. The income you receive from the state after you have retired is called a _____.
8. A polite word for an old person is an _____ person.
9. If you put off or delay something, you _____ it.

5. Discussion

Developments in science and medicine may eventually make it possible to delay, slow down or even reverse the ageing process. This could mean a life expectancy of 150 or even 200 years. Make a list of the pros and cons of such a situation. What would happen to the world if we all lived to the age of 200? How would this change people's behaviour?