
“AGEING WELL” MUST BE A GLOBAL PRIORITY

6 November 2014, Geneva – A major new Series on health and ageing, published in *The Lancet*, warns that unless health systems find effective strategies to address the problems faced by an ageing world population, the growing burden of chronic disease will greatly affect the quality of life of older people. As people across the world live longer, soaring levels of chronic illness and diminished wellbeing are poised to become a major global public health challenge.

Worldwide, life expectancy of older people continues to rise. By 2020, for the first time in history, the number of people aged 60 years and older will outnumber children younger than 5 years. By 2050, the world’s population aged 60 years and older is expected to total 2 billion, up from 841 million today. 80% of these older people will be living in low-income and middle-income countries.

The increase in longevity, especially in high-income countries (HICs), has been largely due to the decline in deaths from cardiovascular disease (stroke and ischaemic heart disease), mainly because of simple, cost-effective strategies to reduce tobacco use and high blood pressure, and improved coverage and effectiveness of health interventions.

However, although people are living longer, they are not necessarily healthier than before – nearly a quarter (23%) of the overall global burden of death and illness is in people aged over 60, and much of this burden is attributable to long-term illness caused by diseases such as cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, heart disease,

musculoskeletal diseases (such as arthritis and osteoporosis), and mental and neurological disorders.

This long-term burden of illness and diminished wellbeing affects patients, their families, health systems, and economies, and is forecast to accelerate. For example, latest estimates indicate that the number of people with dementia is expected to rise from 44 million now, to 135 million by 2050.

However, the responsibility for improving quality of life for the world’s older people goes far beyond the health sector, say the Series authors. Strategies are needed that better prevent and manage chronic conditions by extending affordable health care to all older adults and take into consideration the physical and social environment. Examples include changing policies to encourage older adults to remain part of the workforce for longer (e.g., removing tax disincentives to work past retirement age), emphasising low-cost disease prevention and early detection rather than treatment (eg, reducing salt intake and increasing uptake of vaccines), making better use of technology (eg, mobile clinics for rural populations), and training health-care staff in the management of multiple chronic conditions.

World Health Organization. Media centre. “Ageing well” must be a global priority [Internet]. Geneva: WHO; 2014 [cited 2014 Dec 5]. Available from: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/lancet-ageing-series/en/>.