

Health crisis looms as life expectancy soars

LEVEL THREE - ADVANCED

Scientists warn of complacency as Western governments drastically underestimate average lifespan
James Meek

1 Pre-reading activities

Before you read the text, decide which of these statements about life expectancy you think are true and which are false:

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

Now read the text and check your answers.

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

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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."

The Guardian Weekly 16-5-2002, page 11

2 Comprehension check

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

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3. Vocabulary work

Match the following words with their meanings:

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 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 |

4. More vocabulary – prepositions

Fill the gaps using appropriate prepositions

1. Healthspan is not keeping pace _____ lifespan.
2. In other words it is lagging _____ lifespan.
3. This has many implications _____ pensions, health and welfare.
4. Healthspan means the period of life that people are free _____ chronic illness.
5. Governments will have to face up _____ the changing situation.
6. The awareness of the lifespan situation was previously confined _____ a small group of specialists.
7. Many historians are intrigued _____ the strange characteristics of science.
8. People will have to adapt _____ the new situation.
9. There may be no absolute limit _____ life expectancy.
10. Governments are responsible _____ setting retirement ages.

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5. Reported Speech

Reporting verbs. In this passage a lot of reports are made of what people other than the writer have said or written about the issues. In the first sentence, for example, the opinions of some scientists are introduced using the phrase:

. . . *scientists warned last week.*

Look through the passage again and underline all of the phrases used to report speech or written text.

Complete each sentence with one suitable word. Do not use say.

- The pupils _____ that the teachers never trusted them.
- She _____ me that the road over the mountain was often impassable.
- It has been _____ that global warming will create vast deserts around the world.
- The army officer _____ that all soldiers had been issued with orders not to shoot.
- Scientists _____ that obesity is set to become an even bigger health problem.

6. 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?