

AGEING BETWEEN HEALTH AND ILLNESS: MYTHS, REALITY AND FUTURE

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Abstract

Approximately 6% of the world population comprises those aged 65 years or over, ranging from 3 to 17% in different world regions and countries. Over the last 100 years annual mortality rates have declined from three times and life expectancy have doubled and is reaching towards 100 years of age. The estimates are confirming these trends to continue in the next decades, for example the proportion of the oldest old will double in 2040.

The public attitude and prevailing beliefs perceive old people as a social, economic and health care burden to societies measured through money that younger people have to pay and work for in order to enable the existence of elderly. Ageing is therefor stigmatized in various domains both in health as in illness. Ageing has been defined as a process that starts in mature period of life and ends up with death. The process of ageing is usually seen as decline in function and structure of ageing body and it's organs. The same view applies for ageing mind and brain. According to these

assumptions only decline in cognition, strengths, efficacy, capabilities and function can be expected. However the evidence does not confirm these assumptions in all domains of ageing as a physiological process. The same holds true for illnesses in the elderly, which are popularly viewed as terminal, ending up with imminent death. Dementia might serve as a prototype illness in elderly to understand attitudes, myths and beliefs concerning old age.

The diagnosis of dementia is associated with suffering, invalidity and decline in various domains of individual's life. Often people see dementia as incurable illness, the treatment of dementia as inefficient and too expensive. People with dementia are often excluded from the process of health care, and nursing care. Stigma associated with dementia might reinforce negative feelings, isolation and despair in persons with dementia as well as in their relatives.

The above mentioned trends and attitudes will be further discussed in perspective of individual, health and society.

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