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The age old question

Javier Yanguas and Elena Urdaneta, of the Matia Foundation Gerontological Institute, share their thoughts on why a more positive view of the ageing process is urgently required...

The conceptualisations of the term 'elderly' and of the ageing process form a part of almost all current thought. Our society has been developed under negative stereotypes of 'old age' and 'ageing', and these ideas – once learned – exert great power. They are the basis of individual and/or social conduct of which we are not in the habit of being conscious, and they can even determine a discriminatory behaviour. These stereotypes are so prevalent – and in some ways should not be underestimated – that both the United Nations and the World Health Organization have issued different recommendations to governments worldwide in order to tackle such false beliefs.

There is a common view in our society that comes to establish that the majority of older people are unable to learn new things, can no longer look after themselves, and that, as the years turn, they become different, and possibly disagreeable. However, all of these affirmations are false. The information that we possess does not support the existence of a defining moment in which the health deteriorates, and endorses that – in life – a wide learning capacity exists, which simultaneously confirms that people do not change their personality when they are 'elderly'. On the contrary; science accredits the fact that the body only ages because it has 'lived'.

Empirical information deduces that the existence of an extraordinary variability in ageing – that is to say, the differences between older people – is significant. In this sense, we cannot generalise such differences, but it happens habitually that the 'practice' is more important than the age. It is not necessarily true, for example, that the speed of typing of the authors of this article will decline with age; a person trained (be they older or not) will be much faster than the untrained person. In multiple aspects, age is not more important than the practice or the experience, but very much on the contrary – the experience or practice has major influence on behaviour rather than the age.

Nevertheless, the negative stereotype has implications for the wider social group. As soon as it has been learned and acquired that with the age come all kinds of 'punishment', we end up believing it ourselves and live in conformity with it. Many authors have looked at this, notably R Levy, of the Department of Epidemiology of the Faculty of Medicine at



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Yale University, who enabled a line of research in multiple studies, concluding that the negative stereotypes of aging have an influence, for example, provoking stress and less effective strategies in older people, even having an effect on life expectancy. For example, people who demonstrate greater positivity live longer than those who have negative preconceptions of ageing.

We should therefore change our vision of ageing – the future of the ageing process requires a multidimensional and transversal point of view where the old person is not defined or reduced to a single part of his/her body or mind.



Javier Yanguas
Director



Elena Urdaneta
Deputy Director
Matia Foundation Gerontological
Institute (INGEMA)
Tel: +34 94322 4643
ingema@ingema.es
www.ingema.es