

DYING TOO LONG



WE ROUNDED THE CORNER INTO THE TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY. physicians and medical researchers took special note of the state of health and medical care in the United States and the industrialised world Looking back over a century gone by, the comparisons of diseases are remarkable. In the early 1900s people primarily died of infectious diseases The four leading causes of death in the U.S. back then were pneumonia, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and influenza, and people had a life expectancy of a little more than forty three years. But thanks to the discovery of antibiotics and advances in their development during the second half of this century, deaths due to infectious diseases declined dramatically, even after the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. As we move into the twenty-first century, we find people primarily suffering and dying from what are known as chronic degenerative diseases. These include coronary artery disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, arthritis, macular degeneration, cataracts, Alzheimer's dementia, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis. The list goes on and on. Even though the average life expectancy in the United States has increased dramatically during this past century, our quality of life due to these chronic degenerative diseases has taken a major hit. We are essentially "living too short and dying too long," "How long do you expect to live? Let's set aside the quality of life for a moment (as

It is health which is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver. " – Mahatma Gandhi

do many research studies on longevity) and consider how the U.S. compares with all the other industrialised nations in the world when it comes to life expectancy and health care. One of the primary ways to evaluate a nation's health-care system is to look at the death rate of that country.

In 1950 the United States ranked seventh among the top twenty-one industrialised nations in the world when it came to life expectancy. As you might imagine, we have spent far more money on health care since that time than any other country in the world. In 1998 we spent more than \$1 trillion on health care, averaging 13.6 percent of our gross national product. That is more than twice as much as the next closest nation. 'We have our MRI and CT scanners, angioplasty, bypass surgery, total hip and knee replacement, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, antibiotics, advanced surgical techniques, advanced drugs, and intensive care units. Did all our medical advances increase U.S. life expectancy?

In 1990 our nation ranked eighteenth in life expectancy when compared to the same twenty-one industrialised nations forty years prior. In spite of the billions of dollars Americans spend on health care, we are now considered one of the worst industrialised nations in the world when it comes to life expectancy. The health-care system we claim is the best in the world is actually near the worst when we look at how long Americans live -or don't live. I asked how long you expect to live, but now envision what your last twenty years will look like. Are you getting your money's worth? I don't think so. I can assure you that my patients today are not as concerned with the number of years in their lives as they are with the quality of life in those years. Are you? The number of years we live is not usually the most important consideration when it comes to evaluating our approach to health care. Who wants to live to a ripe old age if he cannot even recognise his closest family member because he has Alzheimer's dementia? Who looks forward to suffering severe joint or back pain because of degenerative arthritis? Our nation is suffering from Parkinson's disease, macular degeneration, cancer, strokes, and heart disease with unprecedented frequency. The health-care community prides itself on promoting

preventive care.

But have you ever given that approach much thought? Physicians certainly do encourage patients to have routine physicals in order to maintain their health.

But a closer look into doctors' helpful recommendations quickly leads one to the conclusion that they are simply attempting to detect disease earlier. Think about it. As I've mentioned physicians routinely perform pap smears, mam-mograms, blood work, and the physical exam primarily to see if any silent diseases already exist in their patients. What has been prevented?

Obviously the earlier these diseases are detected, the better it is for the patient. The point I want to

“Time and health are two precious assets that we don't recognise and appreciate until they have been depleted”

-DR.MAYANK BAMBORIYA

stress here, however, is the minimal time and effort the physician or the health-care community actually gives to teaching patients how they can protect their health. In other words physicians are simply too busy treating disease to worry about educating their patients in healthy lifestyles that help avoid developing degenerative diseases in the first place.



“The first wealth is health.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson