

Science Spends Little to Extend Life's Span

By ROBERT MUSEL
United Press International
 London — (UPI) — Some primitive tribes have been known to get rid of the old folks by pegging them out in the snow or the wilderness and letting them die.

No one would dare accuse civilization of such direct methods. In fact there would be an outcry if anyone were blunt enough to suggest that western man was in no position to criticize his aboriginal cousin on this custom.

But there are scientists who believe that thousands, perhaps millions, of senior citizens in our advanced society die before their time, or do not live as long as they might, simply because the amount spent on research to keep the healthy and active is totally inadequate.

Foods Sets Custom
 The remote tribesman lets his parents go because he must. In the desperate conditions of some primitive societies those who can no longer provide their own food must die for the want of it.

Civilization does not have this excuse. The key that will unlock some of the secrets of longevity and provide healthier and longer lives for present and future generations is well known. It is money, lots of it, brought to bear on research which, at least, promising.

Out of every 100,000 people born in western countries on the level of the United States about 200 live to be more than 100 years old. But 70,000 of this group will die before the age of 80. Gerontologists — specialists in aging — believe they can narrow the gap given something approximating the vast sums lavished on the maladies of youth.

Extend Human Life
 Now comes the strangest part of the story. For workers in the field find, surprisingly, very little enthusiasm for research to extend human life. Some of them report apathy and lack of public interest. Dr. John Bray, the British pathologist who identified the bacteria of infantile gastro-enteritis, one of the big killing diseases of in-

fancy, says he ran into definite hostility.

He found this so disturbing that he has changed the objectives of a private fund he established five years ago for basic research into aging. It will now deal with the physical well being of the elderly although he himself will continue his own study of a germ which seems to have some effect on cholesterol — the waxy substance implicated in hardening of the arteries.

Pressure on Youth
 "You get the reaction that it would be a bad thing if the population of the world were greatly added," Dr. Bray told United Press International. "The pressure is to help youth."

"It's easy to move people emotionally about youth. But as for the old — well, they've had their day, the sooner they get off the stage the better and so on."

"That's the sort of thing you hear. It reminds me of a short story I once read, H. G. Wells I think, about youth being antagonistic to the thought of extending life because it meant they would have to wait longer to inherit."

Bray's experience is not unique. One of the scientists he has been in touch with, Dr. Johan Bjorksten of the Bjorksten Research foundation of Madison, Wis., author of a widely-discussed theory of aging — also reported he had run into obstacles in his own efforts to prolong life.

Age Unavoidable
 Finnish-born Dr. Bjorksten, who is chairman of the board of the American Institute of Chemists, said one of these was indifference caused by a public conviction that aging and senility, as well as death, are as unavoidable as taxes.

Another was "fear" of the political problems that would be created if populations were increased through control of aging without a corresponding reduction in the birth rate.

"I took a war to bring Fleming's basic discovery of penicillin to a practical fruition," Dr. Bjorksten said. "Must we wait for an atomic holocaust to wipe out a large portion of humanity before we can have a concerted drive for the major extension of healthful life by control of aging?"

One man who has made a survey of the subject, Dr. Robert De Ropp, a British biochemist and researcher for the Rockefeller institute, said he found scarcely one major scientific institute in the United States solely concerned with the problem of aging.

There was excellent scattered research in the United States and in Europe, Dr. De Ropp said, but its total was ludicrously small in view of the social importance of the problem. Compared to the billions being spent on the moon race, he said, the total devoted to research into aging would scarcely buy one medium-sized rocket.

What this would mean in actual years added to life expectancy (now about 70 years in the United States) is debatable. There have been estimates that a cure or successful treatment for cancer and heart disease would add nine years. If man could learn to cool himself down at night instead of working his body machine at full gear while asleep, to keep his tempera-

ture high, it might mean another 20 years of life.

The above figures must be read against the fact that scientists are not quite sure what the "normal" life span is.

De Ropp says it is doubtful if any man has ever lived out a full span since this would require perfect conditions all the way. The lungs, intestines, kidneys and brain could probably live for 150 years if they had an adequate blood supply.

Hearst Gives Out
 But the heart and arteries do not appear to be strong enough to keep pumping that long, Dr. Louis Dublin, a life insurance company statistician, holds.

"By some inexorable law, still to be discovered and clarified, nature has allowed man a life span of about 100 years. But very few lives complete this span."

Bray thinks the chief benefit of gerontological research might not be more years but healthier and more active years.

Despite the skimpiness of money and facilities, scientists in the field are optimistic.

For one thing life expectancy has been creeping steadily upwards, largely, it is true, because death no longer ends so many young lives but also because of better management of some of the diseases of the elderly. At the time of the American revolution life expectancy for the colonists was 35 years — just half of what it is today.

Can Prolong Life
 For another, scientists working with rates and insects have proved they can prolong life and preserve youth and in some rare cases even bring about rejuvenation. Some insects were actually made younger by treatment with a "juvenile hormone."

There is possibly an object lesson for humans in the rats used in the experiments at Cornell university. Those which were well fed lived their usual life span. Those which were given a near-starvation diet lived longer. At university college in London fruit flies had their lives prolonged by controlled changes in temperature.

Of the many theories of aging Bray is at present most impressed with Bjorksten's contention that it is due to a cross-linkage in the cells of the body of large vital molecules, such as protein

and nucleic acid molecules, so as to tie them together.

Describes Cell Tie
 "The effect is like what would happen in a large factory with thousands of workers if someone slipped a pair of handcuffs on one hand of two workers to tie them together," Dr. Bjorksten says.

"This obviously would reduce their ability to do their work. And if the process were allowed to spread through the factory, even at a slow rate, it would ultimately paralyze the whole operation unless means were found to remove the handcuffs faster than they were being applied. The intermediate products which accumulate in the body when more food is taken in than can be utilized immediately are known cross-linking which, if his theory is correct, steadily decreases the resistance of the cell to damage or infection as the years go by.

One reason for the hostility against gerontological re-

search," said Bray, "is the mental block most people have which makes it difficult for them to dissociate old age and senility. Most people think we are trying to perpetuate the lives of the decrepit.

"Actually the situation is the reverse. We are trying to make old people the opposite of decrepit, that is healthy and self-supporting. Unfortunately the average person cannot think of old people this way — yet."

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The Family Council

Editor's note: The Family Council consists of a judge, a physician, three clergymen, three editors and a women's editor. Each article is a summary of a family disagreement presented to the Council. The Council deals with problems, major and minor, encountered by guidance counselors and social workers. Edited by Mrs. Alma Denny. (Copyright by General Features Corp.)

Mrs. P. V. — We're stunned by her decision to become a nun.

Mrs. E. T. — They must let her decide about her own life.

Mrs. P. V. — We have an only daughter. She's 19 and in her second year at college. We expected her to become engaged to her steady beau this summer, and eventually get married and make grandparents of us.

Imagine the state we're in now that she has sprung the news on us that she's broken off with her boy friend, wants to quit school, and become a postulant in a convent. We are a religious family, but nobody has gone so far as to join a monastic order. All we can figure is that someone from the church brainwashed her in a weak moment. My husband is a wreck over this turn of events.

We keep hoping Ruth will reconsider. But my sisters and others say we should resign ourselves to having her become a nun.

Mrs. E. T. — They should leave the girl alone. I know my sister and brother-in-law have had high hopes for Ruth. She's a bright, beautiful girl, and the apple of their eye. At one time she wanted to be a doctor, but since entering college she hasn't mentioned

that and hasn't shown much enthusiasm for anything. Now that I know why, I can understand the pressure she is under and I'm trying to get my sister to stop moaning. Instead she should feel proud to have a daughter who wants to serve selflessly through the church.

The trouble is that Ruth's parents are trying to live her life for her. She has other ideas. She's old enough to know what appeals to her. And if she changes her mind, she can come home.

The Council: In order to round out a helpful answer for this family, we queried friends whose daughters had faced them with the same announcement at Ruth's. What we say here is a composite of actual experience plus general psychological insights.

Mrs. V. would never forgive herself if her "carrying-on" forced her daughter to abandon her plans and pursue a course of life pleasing to her parents but unappealing to her. They'd see the problem more clearly if they looked neither to the right nor to the left but squarely into the eyes (and heart, if possible) of their child. Never mind the parents down the block who have grandchildren. Never mind the neighbor's daughter who has just been appointed vice president of a Fifth Avenue department store. What would make Ruth happy? That's the answer to concentrate upon.

She herself feels that this is what she wants to be — a professed nun. The only valid comment for a parent might be, "Why not take a year out in order to be sure?" Ruth might spend that year holding down a job, mainly to test her predilection for the disciplined, dedicated life of the convent. She's only 19 and may agree to seek deeper experience in the outside world before taking the vows which limit this.

But once she is absolutely certain that her peace and happiness lie in joining a holy Order, there should be nothing but pride and encouragement from the parental corner. Suppose Ruth became a doctor and was miserable? Suppose she contracted a wretched marriage? Then her parents would have something to be in a "state" about. Instead, they'll be able to move along, playing a useful role in the world, and enjoying it more each year.

As Mrs. T. her aunt, reminds us, the decision is not irrevocable. There are many points along the way where Ruth can drop out. Meanwhile, her family will see her and be in touch with her on frequent occasions, for many of the Orders of the Dominicans for one — have lenient rules on that. As for grandchildren, we quote the father of a nun who is teaching 2nd grade and "has" 39 children: "She adores them, they love her. When we visit her class we see we have more grandchildren than any of our friends. And we rejoice to be the parents of this beautiful soul who is living exactly the sort of life she wants to live."

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