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How Long a Life is Enough Life?

Daniel Callahan and Willard Gaylin¹

Short summary

In this article Daniel Callahan and Willard Gaylin evaluate the scientific efforts of life span extension. They discuss whether such efforts would improve human life, such that future generations would appreciate them, and if they can be considered a good investment in scientific terms, considering other urgent human needs.

Introduction

Medical care and social conditions have improved over the past six decades and global life expectancy has increased by three years per decade as the result. This development has led some scientists to believe that the human life span can be extended much further. Scientists such as Aubrey de Grey, head of the SENS Research Foundation, have suggested that it may be possible to extend the human life span by several hundred years - or perhaps even to find a cure for death. Other groups of scientists suggest that a human life span of 110-120 years may become the future norm. A third group, including sociologist S.J Olshansky, promote the idea of a “Longevity Dividend”, claiming that health and economic benefits can be achieved by seeking ways to give aging humans better health. The “Longevity Dividend” approach does not promote expansion of the average human life span as a goal for research, but life expectancy may increase because of the efforts to achieve better health while aging.

Main argument:

Callahan and Gaylin are concerned with the scientific efforts that focus on life span extension as the primary goal and question the justification for use of resources for this purpose.

- According to the authors, the vast majority of longevity advocates are middle-aged men, and the desire to expand human life expectancy much beyond 100 years is not commonly shared by the public.
- Not much serious speculation is being done with regards to the social implications should these efforts succeed. Referring to work done by Kenneth Boulding, the authors highlight that a much-expanded average human life span would likely impact the age-

¹ Callahan, D. and Gaylin, W. (2017). How Long a Life is Enough Life? Hastings Center Report 47, no. 4 (2017): 16-18.

specific role structure in society, including job structures and family structures. Callahan and Gaylin are concerned that the society is not prepared for these changes, and that future generations may suffer as a consequence. Moreover, they question the longevity enthusiasts' assumption that the physical and mental health and well-being of the aging population will be good.

- Scientific efforts aimed at extending the average human life span take away scientific and economic resources that could be directed at addressing problems such as climate change, poverty, and infectious and chronic illnesses – problems that represent a threat to the health and well-being of the world's population now and in the future. According to the authors, this prioritization of resources favors the desire of the few and fails to meet the needs of many.

Conclusion

The authors conclude that scientific efforts aimed at drastically extending the average human life span will exacerbate social and economic. With regards to the current speculative efforts, the authors find that “the most promising and reasonable” efforts are those that focus on the “Longevity Dividend”.