

Why is it that the elderly are living as long as ever b...

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New research shows that those in their late 60s now are sicker than those in their late 80s were at the same point in their lives. Why isn't prosperity delivering wellness, and what can we do about it?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WxRHgOqIFM?si=CHWj0UKVUtG191MV

The audio version is here:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=xy27f-170163e-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Why are the old getting more sick? It's a pretty personal question, as far as I'm concerned, because I have been looking at a study in the Journal of Gerontology, which may not be part of your usual reading material, and if I am honest, nor is it mine, but a series of authors in that journal, led by somebody called, and I'm going to check, Laura Gimeno, and I may have said her name incorrectly, and if so, I apologise, have produced an article published in July this year, but which is now getting some publicity, and it talks about the fact that people of literally my age appear to be much sicker at my age than were those who were 20 years older than us, i. e. those born between 1935 and 1939.

So, the study looks at people born between those two years in the 1930s and people born between 1955 and 1959 in the 1950s. And I was born in 1958. So you can see that

I have a certain degree of personal interest in this study.

And their finding is quite extraordinary. Particularly in the UK and the USA, but also in part in the rest of Europe, what they have found is that the prevalence of major chronic illness, is about 1.5 times higher amongst those who are now in their later 60s, which is the group who are born between 1955 and 1959 than was the prevalence of those same diseases in that earlier group.

The diseases in question include things like cancer and heart problems, diabetes, lung disease, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.

And they also looked at some of the consequences of these things, including mobility limitations, mild disability, moderate disability, and severe disability.

And they found that all of those things are much more commonplace as well, again in broadly the same ratio.

People are therefore much more sick between the ages of 65 and 70 now than they were if they hit those ages 20 years ago.

The baby boomers, in other words, are not as fit as those who were born before the Second World War. And that is inherently odd to those of us who think that surely somebody born at the peak of the baby-boom era must be in a better health position as a consequence of their improved lifestyle than those who were born just before the Second World War and had to go through all that rationing and everything else in their early lives, but apparently not.

So what is going on here? They genuinely don't know, and I have bothered to read most of the paper. They did not try to answer the question as to why, but they do note that obesity does appear to be a significant factor in this.

They do also note that the lack of exercise appears to be a significant factor in this.

And they do appear to think that there is a major contribution from higher levels of uncertainty for some people in society over this period so that those who have lived in societies where there is more stress about unemployment or income security appear to have worse health outcomes.

Now none of that I guess surprises us, but even so we still have to ask the question, why is it, if we are so much richer 20 years after the pre-war cohort were born, that we are physically worse off?

Why in fact might our life expectancy be lower if we've reached this point of time than was the case for those who were born just before the Second World War? They don't provide definitive answers, and therefore I stress what I'm saying here is my guesswork guided in part by their comments.

And certainly they do seem to think that diet is a part of this. We have, of course, lived diets which are ultra processed, which have been heavily manufactured, which was not what that earlier generation was brought up on.

But the other factor is, of course, that those who are of literally my generation have lived through the period when security in old age has begun to disappear. So, for example, the guarantee which was so commonplace at one time of a good pension linked to your salary has gone. The guarantee of a job for life, which was the effective offer of the post war consensus, disappeared, of course, 20 to 30 years ago. And a great many people who are now approaching retirement have lived through years of insecurity from their fifties onwards as finding a job has become so much harder.

It appears that all of this has had a heavy price on our well-being. We are not living less, is the conclusion of this paper, so far. But we are living for much longer. with chronic illness. Now that's really important because chronic illness costs us a great deal. The question to be asked, of course, is how do we manage that chronic illness and whether we can do something about it now?

So, for example, in the UK and the US, there is significant evidence of people of my age, 66 and above, simply being physically weaker. than those who are 20 years older than us when they were our age.

Our grip is weaker. A grip is a massive indicator of muscle strength, and muscle strength is a massive indicator of when we are going to need to basically enjoy residential support to carry on living because when we run out of muscle strength, we fall over, and that's the biggest reason why people end up in care homes.

So, there are things that are simply wrong. We aren't walking enough, we're not exercising enough, we're not doing enough weights.

Our diets aren't good enough. As a consequence, we're ending up with dementia earlier. And there are many doctors, who I'm well aware now, think that dementia is heavily related to a high sugar, ultra processed food diet.

This is a wake-up call. Our increased prosperity is not delivering well-being for most people.

Firstly, we should ask, therefore, what is this prosperity all about if it isn't delivering this most fundamental of goods?

But secondly, we should be asking how we need to change the diets, the lifestyles, and the exercise patterns of those who are younger. Because if this trend has happened, and seriously happened, over a period of just 20 years, then what's going to happen to those who are following us?

Is this going to get much worse? I don't know the answer, but reasonably we can expect

that this trend will continue. And because we can reasonably expect that, we should be changing a great deal. We're not getting old gracefully, and that really worries me.