THE AGING PROCESS

Dr A A Kamal

To the little boy, his 30 years old father is an old man while his 60 years old grand father is ancient.

But reaching sixty, you don't necessarily feel ancient EVEN when it appears that the whole world is conspiring against you, to make you feel old and rejected in order to make room for others. It is a common practice in professional life that nearing sixty, the person next in line of succession just can't wait to see the back of you. He would always insist that you slow down, take it easy and rest more and that he would take care of everything.

This is what aging is and what it may do to you if you are not careful. The aging Process is a physiological slowing down compounded by the physiological pressures of your own surroundings. It may seem that everyone has conspired against you to make you feel old. Whether or not you do so, is a different story altogether.

The physiological slowing down is a creeping diminution of energy and vigor. One day you are surprised at your own loss of interest in things beautiful when you don’t give a second glance to the smart young things around you.

Many bodily functions begin to decline and slow down, the liver and kidneys included. Hitherto interesting activities begin to feel like a burden and a bore. You don’t jump out of bed anymore. You want to do less and rest more and if you do not fight this tendency, you are well and truly on your way to becoming a "cabbage".

The term "slowing down" truly describes the Aging Process and its effects on all bodily activities. Degenerative changes in the joints lead to stiffness and decrease in mobility. With less and less work, the muscles get weaker and weaker.

Movements get painful. Episodes of loss of consciousness and "drops attacks" become frequent.

Memory of recent things begins to deteriorate. You don’t remember names and happenings.

All this leads to a lack of anything to look forward to and to live for. The shrunken old man in you is now full of apathy and is self-centered. His memory of things long gone may come in flash backs but he is not aware of his recent past.

Because of the natural process of degeneration plus malnourishment, bones become osteoporotic and easily break. Spinal osteoporosis begins to shrink the vertebral bodies and along with a decrease in inter-vertebral disc space, there is gradual loss of height.

Osteo-arthritis joints cause pain and shiftless as well as a re-molding of bone around arthritis joints and these inches them denser.

The end result is sadly as expected. The elderly tend to do less, go out less, are less interested in or aware of their surroundings, thus eventually heading for a diminished life style. Ultimately, a gradual failure of all physiological functions is seen resulting in death.

But, can something be done about it? The answer is YES.

Generally, you are considered old beyond 75, but in between 65 and 75 you are classified as elderly. Between 60 and 65, it depends on where you stand. To your impatient successor, the sooner you drop dead the better. Yourself? Well! You may feel you still have many useful years ahead of you if you are determined to go on "living". The first principle of life after 60 should be to remain active and useful. Start getting up early as you have done all your life.

Keep abreast of all that is happening in the house, the neighborhood, the city as well as the country. In short, be alive and actively involved. If you are a professional, keep working. Your market value may have reduced but you are still useful. Do everything to stop yourself from wasting away mentally as well as physically.

If you have been a white collar worker, you are likely to have more difficulty in facing the reality of retirement. Prepare yourself mentally. Develop a hobby. (Practical people, the British tend to their gardens, however small they may be).

Hobbies can be as varied as one’s imagination and ability.

Collecting various things, the commonest beings stamps, even matchboxes or bottle caps provide a challenge.

Other interesting activities that may be taken up include
painting or sketching, reading poetry, or writing. Why not write yours memoors? Global Aging is another aspects of the Aging Process that we tend to forget.

Global Aging is leading the world to the brink of a crises with old people likely to outnumber the young sooner than you think. Global Aging threatens the developed countries. It will destabilize the global economy and even overturn the geo-political order”, said a wise man at a seminar in Singapore.

Countries should increase employment among working age adults, encourage later retirements and so on. And it is later retirement that I wish to come back to.

Life expectancy at the time of Partition was 40 years old or so and the retirement year was 60. Today life expectancy is 55, but the retirement age is still 60. More and more people now face retirement when their mental and physical faculties are still at their peak. Should we not increase the retirement age for the sake of the country’s economy as well as all those talented people who are thrown in the rubbish dump at age to gradually wither and die?

N.B. The author is a busy Orthopaedic Surgeon on the wrong side of sixty.