

Ernest G. Ross



Live Long and Prosper

THE AVERAGE LIFESPAN continues to increase in the United States. Once the deleterious effects of greater cigarette smoking among males are taken into account,¹ American men and women can reasonably hope to live well into their seventies. At the time of this nation's founding, the expectation was only about half that.

The trend which started long ago shows few signs of abating. "Life extension is not a new concept. Pioneers such as Semmelweis, who advocated that doctors wash their hands before examining pregnant women in labor (to control the deadly bacterial infection called puerperal fever); sanitation engineers; and other public-health officials around the turn of the century extended life

substantially by preventing communicable diseases through antiseptics, immunizations, sewage control, and sanitary food and water processing."²

In most modern nations huge amounts of money (hundreds of billions of dollars in the U.S. alone) yearly go to various health-related programs designed to prevent, arrest, or reverse the various diseases and deteriorations which shorten human life. As an international underscoring of this effort, note that at \$234.5 million the World Health Organization of the U.N. received the biggest single-agency share of the U.N.'s 1983 annual budget of \$1.63 billion.³

In a sense, the entire field of medicinal research directly or indirectly promotes the extension of human life. But many other disciplines,

such as genetic engineering, computer-assisted diagnostics, biophysics and chemistry, radiation research, and nutrition—to mention just a few of the productive shafts of the life-extension gold mine—also contribute.

There is little doubt that science values the idea of enabling people to live longer. Certainly if we asked the average "man (or woman) in the street" if he thought greater life expectancy is a good thing, he would answer with a resounding, "Yes!"—as long as he could live in good health and decent economic circumstances. In other words, he would like to live long *and* prosper, physiologically and materially, which of course would enormously enhance his happiness.

Blessing or Burden?

Longer lifespan seems an obvious value. It is hard to imagine anyone considering it a negative. Yet, some do. Why? Because, they assert, it might be "too great a burden on society."

This fear about longer life being a burden *rather than a load-lightener* has a distinctively statist origin and appeal. Statism—because of its nature and despite its rhetoric of disguised benevolence—has a rationale for opposing longer lifespans under certain circumstances.

Statism builds and depends for its "life-extension" upon governmental programs which arbitrarily desig-

nate an end to the productive lives of citizens. Historically, in the more barbaric states, the elderly have simply been killed off. In "enlightened" modern statist nations older people are handed stipends. Because statist systems are resistant to change, the prospect of citizens living longer threatens "smooth" functioning and in some cases the very existence of entire bureaucracies.

As we all know, many nations have mandatory retirement ages and ages beyond which citizens are unconditionally entitled to government welfare. Vast, ponderous agencies such as the U.S. Social Security administration and various health care bureaus exist to distribute money taken from those who have not retired to those who have.

The bureaucrats who work in these agencies naturally have a vested interest. Their jobs depend on maintaining the status quo—as long as they can continue to sell government legislators on the idea. But the bureaucrats are primarily concerned with preventing the status quo from moving in one direction: toward the shrinking of their agencies' scope and power. If the status quo changes by expansion, that's quite a different matter.

This was the pattern in America for many years, although it accelerated from around 1945. "Since the end of World War II, the U.S. has moved toward functional socialism

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