Longevity News and Trends in the United States and Abroad

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The Bush Administration has proposed an increase of 13.4% in funding to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to a total of $23.112 billion in Fiscal Year 2002, which was also included in the budget resolution passed by Congress. Some lawmakers and interest groups hope to see an even greater increase in funding. The final amount will be decided during this year’s appropriations process. In any case, it is essential that aging research, which currently comprises roughly 7% of all NIH funding, becomes a greater priority. There are many unanswered questions about what causes the adverse effects associated with aging, and even about what exactly aging is. Research can provide us with answers to these questions by improving our understanding of the mechanisms of aging as well as the causes and treatments of age-related diseases. Given the growing size of our aging population coupled with increases in longevity, a significant investment in aging research will promote the development of effective interventions to prevent or retard adverse aspects of the aging experience—and improve the quality of life of all older Americans.

The Federal Government

Census Bureau.—The Census Bureau (Bureau of the Census, 2001a) reported that the median age of the U.S. population in 2000 was 35.3 years, the highest it has ever been. The median age was 32.9 years in the 1990 census. The most rapid increase in size of any age group was a 49% jump in the 45–54-year-old population, which represents the aging baby boomer population. The Census Bureau is also releasing state and local-level data (Bureau of the Census, 2001b).

Cholesterol.—The National Cholesterol Education Program (National Cholesterol Education Program, 2001) of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute of the NIH has issued new guidelines on the prevention and management of cholesterol in adults. The guidelines significantly increase the number of people who would be candidates for drug therapy, potentially tripling the number of people on cholesterol-lowering drugs to 36 million. In addition, the guidelines stress the need for better nutrition, weight control and physical activity, all of which improve various heart disease risk factors.

Disability.—A study appearing in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (Manton & Lu, 2001) indicates that the rate of chronic disability among older Americans is declining. The report found that the rate of chronic disability among people aged older than 65 years was 26.2% in 1982 and fell to 19.7% in 1999, with an accelerated annual rate of decline between 1994 and 1999. The absolute number of disabled individuals was 7.1 million in 1982, increased to 7.5 million in 1994, but then declined to 7 million by 1999, despite an increase in the total number of individuals older than 65. In addition, the report found that disability rates declined by a greater percentage among African Americans than White people, and that fewer people are living in nursing homes, both as a proportion of the older population and in absolute numbers. Among other issues, the report raises important considerations for the future financing of the Medicare program.

Institute of Medicine.—The Institute of Medicine (Wizeman & Pardue, 2001) has released a report that considers the factors and traits that characterize and differentiate males and females across the lifespan and that underlie sex differences in health. It contains a series of findings and conclusions that emphasize that men and women differ in physiological and chemical ways, and these sex differences should be important considerations in all aspects of biomedical and health-related research.

Medicare/Anesthesia.—The Bush Administration announced it is undoing a Clinton regulation allowing trained nurses, certified nurse-anesthetists, to give anesthesia to Medicare beneficiaries without the supervision of a physician (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001b). The revised reg-

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ulation would revert to the longstanding requirement that nurse-anesthetists may administer anesthesia only when a physician is present, but it will allow states to be exempt from the requirement if they already have a law allowing the nurse-anesthetists to work alone.

MedPAC.—The chair of the Medicare Payment Advisory Committee (MedPAC), Gail Wilensky, has left the group and has been replaced by Glenn Hack-Barth. The change was made by the comptroller general of the United States in an attempt to provide some turnover in the leadership of the commission.

National Institute on Aging (NIA).—The NIA’s Alzheimer’s Disease Education and Referral Center (National Institute on Aging, 2001) has released its Progress Report on Alzheimer’s Disease 2000: Taking the Next Steps. The report provides a description of current knowledge of Alzheimer’s disease and discusses the outlook for future Alzheimer’s research.

Social Security Commission.—President Bush has announced the members of his bipartisan commission on Social Security (White House, 2001). The sixteen-member commission consists of eight Republicans and Democrats and is co-chaired by former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and AOL/Time Warner Chief Operating Officer Richard Parsons. The commission will issue a final report this fall containing specific recommendations for reform, which are expected to include the creation of private retirement accounts.

Surgeon General.—Surgeon General David Satcher (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001a) unveiled National Strategy on Suicide Prevention, which contains a variety of recommendations intended to reduce the number of suicides. Among other findings, the report notes that older people have the highest suicide rate, and organizations with special access to the older population have an important role in suicide prevention.

News From Abroad

Canada.—The Canadian Institute for Health Information (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2001) has released its annual report Health Care in Canada 2001. The report provides new and updated information on key measures of health and health care for 63 of the largest health regions in Canada, representing 90% of the country’s population. Among other highlights, the report notes that: (a) the Canadian life expectancy of 79 years ranks it near the top of all nations, (b) large disparities in treatment and life expectancy exist in different parts of Canada, and (c) childhood obesity is on the rise.

Germany.—The recent court decision that Germany’s public long-term care insurance program is unconstitutional has affected the debate over Germany’s public pension reform plan. The pension plan reform approved in January 2001 would create a private retirement system to complement the public plan. However, it could be derailed as it undergoes final negotiations with the states because of concerns about its constitutionality resulting from the court decision. The court had ruled that the funding formula for long-term care insurance was in violation of a constitutional guarantee to promote the family and said that premiums should be lower for adults with children, as they were helping to finance the future of the program by having children. Opponents of the pension reform plan believe that this concept applies to the pension plan also, whereas supporters believe that the financing system ensures equity for all.

Holland.—Holland is experiencing a stagnation of increasing life expectancy—falling behind other European nations in terms of life expectancy for its citizens, according to a recent study (van der Wilk, Achterberg, & Kramers, 2001). The study authors conclude that high smoking rates in Holland are the main factor for the stagnation.

Nursing.—A new study in the May/June issue of Health Affairs (Aiken et al., 2001) indicates that nurses in other countries, as well as the U.S., share the same frustrations, including staffing shortages, limited input, and dissatisfaction with patient care. The study examined nurses working in acute care hospitals in Canada, England, Germany, Scotland, and the United States.

Stem Cells.—Germany’s main research funding agency (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2001) has issued new guidelines that allow German researchers to import human embryonic stem cells from other countries. German law currently prohibits the derivation of such stem cells from embryos fertilized in vitro. However, the agency also recommends that this law be changed if the importation of embryonic stem cells is insufficient.

United Nations (UN).—The UN has established a website to provide information and news about the Second World Assembly on Ageing, to be held in Madrid in April 2002. The site is www.madrid2002-envejecimiento.org/.

References


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