To the Editor:

It is a common belief that old age begins at 65. Many gerontologists assume that the historical German chancellor Otto von Bismarck is the origin of this belief (Hayflick, 1994a; Hayflick, personal communication, 2012). According to this saying, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1895) engineered his rise to power by making the astute observation that his rivals, all federally employed, were older than 65 years. Acting on his observation, he in 1870 allegedly masterminded legislation, which would force all public servants who reached the age of 65 to retire. After this maneuver, he ascended to power with ease (Hayflick, 1994a, 1994b).

Albeit this story was cautiously considered to be partly apocryphal (Hayflick, 1994a), it appears that it has never been matched against historical facts (Hayflick, personal communication, 2012). This incited us to do a little research.

In brief, the story is unfounded. It was in 1889 that Chancellor von Bismarck introduced a pension scheme in Germany. Compliant with his proposal, the parliament, Reichstag, voted in favor of the law (Gesetz, betreffend die Invaliditäts- und Altersversicherung, 1889) on May 24, 1889. After passing the second chamber of parliament, Bundesrat, and bearing the signature of Emperor Wilhelm II, the law was proclaimed on June 26, 1889 (Gesetz, betreffend die Invaliditäts-und Altersversicherung, 1889). This act determined the time of retirement at the age of 70 years (Gesetz, betreffend die Invaliditäts- und Altersversicherung, 1889).

Public servants, however, were exempt from the new law, as they were already covered by a separate pension scheme and were to retire after 40 years of service (Gesetz, betreffend die Rechtsverhältnisse der Reichsbeamten, 1873). At that time, the life expectancy in Germany (Bavaria) was 37.7 years for newborn males and 41.4 years for newborn females (Bayerisches Landesamt für Statistik, 2010).

In 1889, Otto von Bismarck was very close to the end of his long political career, and on March 18, 1890, he eventually resigned at the age of 74 years (von Bismarck, 1928). Nearly two decades after his death in 1898, the retirement age in Germany was reduced, in 1916, to 65 years.

Bismarck is not a suitable origin for the common belief that old age starts at 65 years.

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References


