IN-DEPTH REVIEW

Age and ageing: an overview

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Europe is ageing, as exemplified by the UK population where, in the foreseeable future, more people will be over than under age 50: industry appears slow to recognise and appreciate all that older workers still have to offer: bundling them off into early retirement wastes precious talents. Memory difficulty is not an inevitable part of ageing.

Key words: Ageing population; older-retirement; memory.

It is most appropriate that this series of articles was commissioned in 1999, that year having been the International Year of the Older Person. Whilst the year might appear to have passed without dramatic increase in awareness of this subject, a lot was going on, culminating in worldwide walks. These started in New Zealand at 11.00 a.m. on the 2 October and spread from there all over the globe.

Of course, we are all ageing from the day we are born, but it may come as a jolt to some people to know that the official starting point of an 'older person', is to be over age 50 years. Almost as riveting is the definition of ageing as 'an irreversible process starting at maturity and resulting in a number of deviations from the ideal state'.

Now that the ostentatious 1980s and the nervous 1990s have given way to the new decade of the 'zeros', one key fact 'set in stone', is that a big shift is occurring in the age profile of the European population. The UK Government Actuary Department forecast a fall over the next 10 years of 1.8 million of people in their 30s (19%), with a rise of 1.6 million of those in their 40s (21%) and 1.4 million in those aged between 55 and 64 years (23%). The largest population bulge is the 1964 generation, when the baby boom peaked, who will be 46 years of age in 2010. The UK will then be much more middle-aged than now, as will Spain and Italy.

Thus the UK population, including you and me, is inexorably ageing, and faster than you may have thought. Of the UK population, 32% is now over 50 years of age; by 2030 this will have increased to 43%, and soon thereafter more people will be over 50 than under 50. The UK will increasingly be populated by citizens who are also known as 'grey panthers', 'silver surfers', 'seniors', 'greys' (a term best avoided), 'baby boomers', 'third age', and 'matures'.

As an aside, marketing colleagues tell me that the over-50s have 80% of UK wealth but only 20% of marketing focus — much of that money is probably tied up in property, but nevertheless, what a business opportunity! — although those with most to spend hold advertising in lowest regard, the opposite of those with least to spend!

Despite all this, and a voluntary code of practice, ageism in the workplace is apparently rife, as if ageing were some dire disease, which it is not. One in ten employers still believe a worker over 30 years of age is 'over the hill', and would not employ a 50-year-old. However, to allow for this demographic trend, pressure seems likely to increase to change compulsory retirement age, already going up from 60 to 65 for women, to age 70 and beyond. Whilst in the UK in the past 30 years there has been a 2 million increase in those retired and a 1 million increase in those working, the next 30 years will see a 4 million increase in those retired and a 2 million decrease in those working. Falling retirement age and early 'packages' mean many seeking a second career — 50,000 aged 50+ start up their own business each year. However, in the UK there has been a 'dampener' to this with a recent Government proposal to raise the minimum age for pension payment from 50 to 55.

Thus the patterns of working life are changing and traditional work structures no longer define working lives. Seniority in a company does not necessarily come with increasing age and length of service. The 'job for life' no longer exists for most people. There is more opportunity but also more uncertainty. Criteria for progression need not include age. Good employment practice rightly focuses on how well someone does the job. Successful business people are not necessarily those who have worked their way up the company. The boss is getting younger and an older worker can be downgraded to accommodate a younger 'high flyer'.

Experience is not considered to be as necessary as it once was; the argument is that 20 years experience could be 1 year's experience 20 times over. The traditional 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. working day in an office or factory will no longer define our working lives. For example, with flexible working practices, more people are working part time or from home, though uneven demands of 60–80
hour weeks followed by little or no work the next, can 
erode rather than enhance a balanced lifestyle. Age is as 
much attitudinal as biological. Part of my MSc disserta-
tion involved a postal questionnaire survey of 100 
pensioners — only one regarded himself as old, adding 
'but young at heart'. We have the choice 'shall I get old or 
not?' Death is certain but use of a Zimmer™ frame is not.

There are inevitably going to be changes of which 
employers and employees alike need to become aware, 
and aspects are examined in the articles in this issue of the 
journal. As for memory and whether or not older people, 
apt from those with Alzheimer's disease, remember as 
well as the young, it has been shown that when asked to 
listen to a series of numbers and letters and then repeat 
them backwards, young people remember and manip-
ulate longer lists faster. An explanation is that older 
people are more easily distracted! However, one alarming 
research finding is that the neurones needed for memory, 
shrink in response to high levels of stress hormones; also, 
some people may be genetically programmed to become 
forgetful as they get older. Memory loss is a distinct 
disadvantage in the workplace, resulting in inefficiency 
and lack of confidence in someone who not only forgets 
the time of an appointment, but also what that appoint-
ment was to be about and with whom it was to be. 
Thankfully, memory loss is not inevitable with advancing 
years. According to evidence reported in a recent issue of 
the International Herald Tribune, over a third of older 
people remember the names and events in their lives as 
clearly as a 20-year-old.

From what I have read, and in the absence of laws 
banning such apparent discrimination, the ageing worker 
may, more than most, be faced with redundancy, when 
age rather than merit and competence is used to reach 
such a decision, as well as about training and recruit-
ment. Cost is also very relevant. It seems that the age 
barrier is moving downwards from the 50s, 10 years ago, 
to the early 40s, which was once regarded as the prime of 
life. Following redundancy, such a person, as at any age, 
can suffer reactions similar to bereavement, with initial 
disbelief followed by shock, grief and unwillingness to 
discuss the subject. The experience is also traumatic for 
the 'messenger'. Thankfully, with time, most people 
begin to re-engage with life, finding hope, some peace of 
mind and ways of managing anxiety, finding inner 
strength and considerable self-reliance. Family and 
friends are greatly appreciated for their love and support, 
but the key workers are also needed, such as those of us 
working in occupational health, who can provide 
specialist support.

Whilst it may be an up-hill struggle in a land where a 
third of UK residents have never met their next door 
neighbour, all the skills of older workers must not be 
allowed to go to waste but used through mentoring to 
help the young.