

Myths of Aging

The older I get the easier it becomes to understand the aging issues we see in long-term care. Since most of our caregivers are younger and the forecast is for them to become still younger, I thought it might be beneficial to share some of the more common misconceptions of aging in the hopes that it will result in more understanding care.

Aging and Weight

To the young most of our residents appear to be either underweight or overweight.

Aging is not a passive biological process. As we age, body composition changes as we tend to have increased body fat and decreased body muscle. While we all have this change we see it differently in men and women. Men have a faster decline in muscle tissue, which results in a total energy expenditure of about 3% per decade. For women the decline is a slightly slower, 2% per year when compared to men. Unfortunately, muscle decline tends to lead to further muscle decline. This means if you continue to eat and exercise at the same level as you age, you will likely gain weight, and this will mostly consist of body fat. This is especially true of our residents who suffer from ambulatory issues or cognitive issues.

While a lack of exercise is associated with depression and more rapid decline in cognitive ability it is not inevitable. Every one of our residents should be offered a cognitively ap-

propriate form of exercise. If you are unsure of which resident is capable of what physical activity, consult with physical or occupational therapy or, failing that, ask nursing.

“All of our residents will eventually get dementia”

Statistics show that an increasing percentage of residents will be admitted to long term care with some symptoms of memory loss and dementia; however, some of these symptoms are due to pseudo dementia which can be reversed, and all can benefit from mental and physical exercise which builds health, better nighttime sleep and more self-esteem. The belief that dementia is inevitable couldn't be farther from the truth.

Most cognitive decline is due to either obesity, which makes a resident 60% more likely to mentally decline, or being inactive, which makes dementia symptoms 80% more likely. On the other hand genetics, having the genes for dementia, only increases dementia risk 20% and some of that risk can be erased through exercise and feeling loved and purposeful. In fact, there is general agreement that the recent decrease in dementia in developed countries is due to better diet and better physical and mental exercise.

“All of our residents have less intelligence because intelligence declines with age”

Intelligence refers to how well we think, but there are lots of different categories of intelligence. For example

our thinking speed, the pace at which messages are transferred from neuron to neuron, does decrease and our ability to remember words (semantic memory) and past events (episodic memory) also decline. However, for most seniors this decline may be offset with improved wisdom, better judgement, and more creativity.

Just like reduced physical exercise decreases both mental and physical health, reduced mental exercise leads to rapid declines in mental abilities and if uncorrected, can result in dementia. Only if we, as caregivers, provide a boring and function-based rather than a person-based environment, will our residents display decreasing intelligence as they age. Fewer than 2% of adults 65-69 years of age have real, diagnosed dementia, and in an appropriately stimulating environment this rises to only 30% for seniors 90 years and over.

Rather than believing the myths of aging, if our caregivers understand it is they who ultimately control the degree of aging our resident experience, our care will improve. While aging has its disabilities we should work at making sure the aging we see in our residents is a real function of their age and not a result of our impersonal caregiving.

This article was generated by reading, “Five common myths about the ageing brain and body” which can be found at http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=11803745