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Urban Deeds

More people may be 20th century's greatest feat

By Chester E. Smolski

This century may well go down in history as humanity's most productive period of accomplishment.

The automobile—perfected in this century—the airplane and the space shuttle were tremendous achievements in the transportation field. The media is now in the forefront of information dissemination with television, radio, movies and computer availability. Plastic, nylon, synthetic rubber and a host of other consumer product developments have made daily living easier. Conquering polio, diphtheria and a variety of other human ailments has increased longevity. It is this increase that is one of man's most important achievements, one that may not be fully appreciated nor fully understood in terms of its current and future influence on lifestyle and national goals and outlook.

In 1776, life expectancy was only 35 years. High birth rates, high infant mortality, high numbers of women who died during pregnancy or childbirth, and high death rates resulted in a short life span.

By 1900, life expectancy had increased by about 12 years. Females at the time lived to be about 48.3, two years older than males.

Expectancy jump

In 1986, life expectancy had increased by 27 years, to 74.9. The jump was greater for women, whose life expectancy rose by 30 years, to 78.3.

Increased life expectancy was due to a decrease during the early part of this century in the rate of deaths of infants and children. Since 1970, however, increased longevity has been due to decreased mortality among the

middle-aged and elderly populations.

The leading causes of death in the United States in 1900 were pneumonia and influenza, diseases that both rank fifth on the list of the top 10 killers today. The flu epidemic of 1918-19 killed more than 20 million people across the globe. In this nation alone, influenza killed more people than were killed in the four major wars the United States has engaged in during this century.

Tuberculosis, the No. 3 killer in 1900, diarrhea, the No. 2 killer (and still a major cause of death in Third World countries), and diphtheria, ranked No. 10 in 1900, are rarely, if ever, considered life-threatening in this country today.

Causes of death change

An aging population means the leading causes of death will be different. Among today's Americans, the No. 1 killer is heart disease, which ranked No. 4 in 1900; No. 2 is cancer, which ranked eighth in 1900; and No. 3 is stroke, which was No. 5 in 1900. Interestingly, the ninth leading cause of death in 1900 was senility, which we know today is a mental affliction and not a direct cause of death.

The ninth and 10th leading causes of death today—neither of which made the list in 1900—are suicide and homicide, a reflection, perhaps, of the malaise that is evident in this nation where violence is all too prevalent.

This newfound ability to increase longevity means an increasingly older population. In 1970, the median age in the United States was 28; in 1980, 30; and today, 32.1. The median age is projected to be 36 by 2000.

In 1900, only 4 percent of the country's population was aged 65 and older. That population has reached 12 percent today and is

expected to rise to 13 percent in 2000 and 21 percent by 2030.

Visible elderly

Rhode Island's 142,000 elderly people make us one of the older states. A median age of 33.4 years in 1987 ranked Rhode Island sixth oldest in the nation. A 14.6 percent elderly population tied us with Pennsylvania for second place, behind Florida at 17.7 percent.

This large population of Ocean State elderly is visible in the many high-rise apartment buildings designed specifically for them, in the age-restricted housing developments, at the senior-citizen centers and on city streets during the day, when others are at work.

It is the lengthened retirement phase of life that has had one of the greatest impacts on the nation and the lifestyles we lead. In 1900, with the average male living to about age 46.3, only 1.2 years, or 3 percent of a lifetime, was spent in retirement. In 1980, by contrast, the average 70-year-old male spent 13.6 years, or 19 percent of a lifetime, in retirement. This exceeds the 18 percent of life beyond 12.6 years of education.

With more years to devote to retirement, and more time for more activities, the elderly are a powerful political force. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), which boasts 30 million members aged 50 and older, is one of the most powerful lobbying groups in the nation. Its bimonthly magazine rivals in circulation the other two leaders in the nation, TV Guide and Readers Digest.

The elderly also vote. Recent surveys by the US Census Bureau on last November's election indicate that the number of voters in the 65-and-older group was the only one that did not decline from the previous election. At

a 69 percent voting-turnout rate, it was the highest of any age group and nearly twice that of the group with the lowest turnout, 18- to 24-year-olds, which registered a 36 percent turnout.

Even the quintessential child-oriented suburbs are getting older. Just as people, jobs and more activities have left the cities, now, for the first time, there are more elderly people in the suburbs than in the cities.

Though one in every eight elderly is poor, the marked improvement of the elderly in the economic sector is important to consider. In 1959, 35 percent of the elderly were poor. Since that time, the proportion has declined to 12.4 percent in 1984.

Perhaps one of the most difficult adjustments for the older person to make is to living alone, usually due to the death of a spouse. In 1988, 24 percent of the 91 million households were occupied by one person, but the highest rates are found among the elderly: 37 percent of the 65- to 74-year-old age group live alone and 55 percent of those 75 and older live alone.

The number of Americans aged 75 and older, presently numbering 13 million, will grow to over 17 million by the end of the century and will represent a challenge to this country.

It is claimed that retirement is no longer a luxury—rather, it is an institution. This institution now occupies a fifth of one's lifetime, the last fifth, and it presents an opportunity for good living and a challenge to provide good care for those at the last stage of life. How the United States handles the situation will be a measure of its civility and social conscience.

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