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AGEING

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“ATTEMPTS TO
EXTEND RADICALLY
THE HUMAN
LIFESPAN SHOULD
BE WELCOMED
NOT FEARED”**

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KEY TERMS

Baby boom

Compressed morbidity, decelerating ageing and arrested ageing

Demographic time bomb

Gerontology

Life extension

Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence (SENS)

INTRODUCTION

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Ageing affects us all, and not just in the sense that we all grow old. As a society we have an ageing population, in which the proportion of people over the traditional retirement age is increasing [Ref: [The Wellcome Trust](#)]. Adapting to this will require significant changes. Britain's ageing population results partly from the fact that the bulge on the population graph produced by the post-war baby boom is beginning to pass the threshold of retirement age [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. Fears have been raised that the 'demographic time-bomb' is about to explode, with significant implications for pensions and healthcare [Ref: [wordwebonline.com](#)]. The principal cause, however, is a general increase in life expectancy. Over the last 150 years, life expectancy in the UK has nearly doubled from 40 to 80 years and research indicates half of babies born today are expected to live to 100 [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Today, however, a few scientists see medical breakthroughs on the horizon that will radically extend our lifespan, perhaps even allowing us to live to 1,000 [Ref: [The Times](#)]! The attitude we adopt as individuals and as a society affects how we see the phenomenon of ageing. Some are happy to grow old gracefully, others go to great lengths in pursuit of the secret of eternal youth [Ref: [The Times](#)]. On one side of the debate are those who see increasing the human lifespan as a straightforward moral imperative. On the other side are those who think the desire to live forever is a selfish attitude that neglects our responsibilities to those who will follow us and ignores the way in which the inevitability of death gives meaning to life. The debate therefore throws up two issues. First, there's the practical question: can we cope with the challenge of an ageing population, now and in the future? Second, there's the underlying moral question: should scientists focus on increasing human lifespan?



What are the different scientific approaches towards ageing?

We age because our bodies have a limited capacity to renew and repair themselves. But while scientists are broadly agreed on why and how we age [Ref: [about.com](#)], scientific research into ageing takes three different forms [Ref: [PubMedCentral](#)]. The conventional ‘compressed morbidity’ approach seeks increases in average human life expectancy, but not in maximum human lifespan. The aim is that all the bad aspects of ageing associated with declining functioning are compressed into a final period of decline at the end of a person’s life. There is evidence of public support for pursuing research into prevention rather than cures and for putting quality of life before simply longevity [Ref: [ipsos-mori](#)]. However, this is increasingly challenged by two other approaches. The ‘decelerated ageing’ approach seeks to slow down ageing processes so that both average life expectancy and maximum lifespan are increased. Finally, the most radical ‘arrested ageing’ approach seeks to ‘cure ageing’ and aims for radical life extension [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)].

Hope I die before I get old?

Should we be anxious about our capacity to adapt to the demands of an ageing population, something which is not just a European problem [Ref: [BBC News](#)] but affects Asia as well [Ref: [BBC News](#)]? Is an ageing population an opportunity [Ref: [spiked](#)] or a burden [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]? First, there are social policy issues to do with the cost of pensions and healthcare. When we factor in the possibility of radical life extension, overpopulation and scarcity of resources is a frequent concern [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. Second, there are social attitudes towards ageing.

Are we able to offer a positive vision of what it means to be old in a society where people appear increasingly keen to hold on to their youth [Ref: [spiked](#)]? Third, what sort of quality of life can we expect in old age? Are we destined for a frail old age or longer, healthier lives? Would life extension risk stringing out lives that are ‘painful and meaningless’ [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)], or is it about making us not ‘older longer’ but ‘younger longer’ [Ref: [Reason](#)]? It’s a question of whether science will allow quantity and quality of life to increase together or whether it’s more likely we will have longer lives but lack the quality of life to enjoy it. Finally, would increased longevity affect our attitude to life? Would we become so focused on living longer that we forget to live?

Who wants to live forever?

Cambridge University biogerontologist [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] Aubrey de Grey, a supporter of the ‘arrested ageing’ approach, has argued that ‘the first person to live to 1,000 might be 60 already’ [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. His recommendations for defeating ageing, known as Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence (SENS), are controversial [Ref: [SENS](#)]. The majority of the scientific community dismiss such views [Ref: [BBC News](#)], although campaigners think that the number of ‘supercentarians’ will increase dramatically [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. Separating scientific hope from hype is an important aspect of the debate; but even if de Grey’s predictions are not realistic, they still offer a challenge to our acceptance of ageing. Should we fight a war against death and see ageing as something that can be overcome? Is it just as important to extend people’s lives as it is to cure disease? As Leon Kass, a notable opponent of radical life

THE AGEING DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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extension, puts it ‘the challenges of an aging society are finally not economic and institutional but ethical and existential’ [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]. Those who follow Kass argue there is a natural cycle of life and death that we should not interfere with. Death is a reality to be faced, not a problem to be solved [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Advocates of life extension argue that, on the contrary, death should not simply be accepted as a ‘fact of life’ but seen as an urgent problem to be overcome by adopting an engineering approach [Ref: [SENS](#)].



ESSENTIAL READING

Carers caught in a club sandwich

Judith Woods *Daily Telegraph* 9 December 2009

Dorian Gray: is there a secret to eternal youth?

Anjana Ahuja *The Times* 8 September 2009

The de Grey Technology Review controversy

Technology Review January 2005

Would doubling the human lifespan be a net positive or negative for us...

Gregory B Stock vs Daniel Callahan *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* January 2005

FOR

Older people are more than 'food for worms'

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 23 July 2009

Can't we celebrate living longer?

John Appleby *Guardian Comment is free* 20 July 2009

Look on the bright side of 'later life'

Ken McLaughlin *spiked* 10 September 2007

The man who will help you live for 1000 years

Greg Critser *The Times* 7 September 2007

AGAINST

Promises of immortality

Khaled Diab *Guardian Comment is free* 2 July 2009

The real problem is that we're living too long

Jeff Randall *Daily Telegraph* 2 November 2007

Toward immortality: the social burden of longer lives

Ker Than *LiveScience* May 2006

I'm going to live forever

Bryan Appleyard *The Sunday Times* March 2005

IN DEPTH

The final indignity

Julia Neuberger *Daily Mail* 3 May 2008

The fable of the dragon-tyrant

Nick Bostrom *Journal of Medical Ethics* May 2005

Age-retardation: Scientific possibilities and moral challenges

President's Council on Bioethics March 2003

Forever young

Ronald Bailey *Reason* August/September 2002 August 2002

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BACKGROUNDEERS

Migration v ageing population - a tricky trade-off

BBC News 19 November 2009

The end of age

BBC Reith Lectures 2001

Forum brief: ageing population

ePolitix

The ageing revolution

BBC News In Depth

The ethics of life-extension

Edmonton Aging Symposium March 2007

'Ageing' populations

Giles Newton *Wellcome Trust* September 2006

Programmed for survival: why and how do we age?

Tom Kirkwood *Wellcome Trust* September 2006

Public say prevention is single most important area for research into age-related ill-health

Ipsos MORI July 2006

The Edge: The Ageing Issue

ESRC November 2005

The science of ageing and anti-ageing

Halldór Stefánsson *EMBO Reports* July 2005

Ageing and health

Medical Research Council (MRC) 2005

Who wants to live forever?

Jayne C Lucke and Wayne Hall *EMBO Reports* February 2005

'Don't fall for the cult of immortality'

S Jay Olshansky *BBC News* December 2004

'We will be able to live to 1,000'

Aubrey de Grey *BBC News* December 2004

See how the UK's population is changing

BBC News November 2004

The prolongevists speak up

John K Davis *American Journal of Bioethics* October 2004

Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence: Reasons why genuine control of aging may be foreseen

The International Association of Biomedical Gerontology 10th Congress October 2003

The ageing population - burden or benefit?

Barnett Waddingham February 2002

Wellcome Focus on Ageing

Wellcome Trust

Healthy ageing

Pfizer ePolitix microsite

ORGANISATIONS

Age Concern

Fight Aging

Immortality Institute

Institute for Ageing and Health (IAH)

The Longevity Meme

The Methuselah Mouse Prize

The Oxford Ageing Institute

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IN THE NEWS

NHS faces 'perfect storm' of funding cuts and rising workload

Daily Telegraph 3 December 2009

Pensioners need Golden Girls luxury not dreary care homes, say ministers

Guardian 2 December 2009

Brussels warns on long-term costs of ageing

Financial Times 15 October 2009

Half of babies 'will live to 100'

BBC News 2 October 2009

Map charts UK's ageing population

BBC News 1 October 2009

Ageing population heralds rise of the 'supercentenarian'

Daily Telegraph 30 September 2009

'Free personal care' for elderly

BBC News 30 September 2009

UK retirement age could rise to 70

The Times 8 August 2009

Population of older people set to surpass number of children, report finds

Guardian 20 July 2009

National care service to help ageing population

Guardian 13 July 2009

Long-term care costs 'to double'

BBC News 19 February 2009

Britain's ageing population 'as big a threat as climate change'

Daily Telegraph 29 May 2008

£20m to help baby boomers grow older gracefully

Observer October 2006

Cameron sees 'ageing UK' benefits

BBC News October 2006

Politicians urged to face up to demographic timebomb

Guardian October 2006

Japan: A country in crisis?

Independent August 2006

Lifespans soon to be decades longer – expert

Reuters August 2006

Scientists at odds over longevity

BBC News March 2006

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

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Surname

School/company/
organisation

Professional role
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone



**“DEBATING MATTERS
TEACHES A WAY
OF THINKING.
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TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER