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Why cutting-edge health care will help the rich live longer

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CHICAGO • Could the 1 percent soon get to live twice as long as the rest of us — maybe even forever?

Immortality may not be in the cards just yet, but exponential breakthroughs in technology and medicine will make possible life spans of 150 years or more, according to Ken Dychtwald.

Dychtwald, a pioneering expert on gerontology, longevity and how the baby boomer wave will impact society, says dramatically longer life spans will not necessarily translate into healthier years, and the longevity gains will not be experienced by everyone.

Instead, we are headed toward a 1 percent phenomenon, with only the very wealthy able to afford the cutting-edge health care that adds meaningfully to life.

Uneven gains in longevity are nothing new. American men live an average of two years longer than they did in 2000, and women have an additional 2.4 years, according to mortality projections released last year by the Society of Actuaries.

Along with the gender gap, higher-income white-collar workers outlive blue-collar workers by 2.5 years, on average, from age 65. Other research points to a sizable longevity gap by educational attainment and race.

Life span tells only part of the story, though.

“We also have people dying longer,” says Dychtwald. “We are able to keep people alive without much quality of life in many cases. We haven’t done a great job of making ‘health span’ match up with life span, which is both miserable and unbelievably costly — and frightening.”

The biggest “health span” concern is Alzheimer’s, which strikes at a 47 percent rate among the over-85 population.

“If we just keep living longer, but we don’t knock out this horrible disease, it will be the sinkhole of the century,” Dychtwald says. “It will take us down — every country. It will be a horror beyond horrors. And how much do we spend for research on this disease? Hardly anything.”

Other debilitating diseases that decrease health span include obesity, heart attacks, strokes, cancer and diabetes.

Substantial attempts to extend health span through more emphasis on fitness and prevention are coinciding with breakthroughs in pharmaceuticals, stem cell therapies and genetic manipulation.

Dychtwald points to the entry of a new breed of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs with big resources at their disposal.

“The talent migrating into the field is like nothing I’ve seen in my 40 years in the field, and they’re convinced there is nothing you can’t do if you can turn biotechnology into information technology,” he says.

LONGEVITY INC.

Craig Venter, one of the first scientists to sequence the human genome, launched a company last year called Human Longevity Inc. that plans to apply genetic sequencing to some of the most challenging issues involving aging.

Calico, a company focused on extending life spans, was launched by Google Inc. in 2013. There is also big money chasing longevity from the Facebook Inc., eBay Inc. and Napster fortunes.

A recent headline in The Week magazine summed it up well: “How Silicon Valley’s billionaires are trying to defy death.”

The new research money is largely private and unregulated. The big breakthroughs will be very expensive and available only to the very wealthy, at least initially.

“There will be breakthroughs in the next 15 or 20 years that will have to do with aging itself — actually stopping the biological clock,” says Dychtwald.

“And I think that really rich people are going to get access to it, people who are willing to spend almost unlimited sums of money. Imagine a time when ten thousand really rich people get to live forever, or not have to get dementia.”

Those remarkable medical advances will become more widely available and affordable over time, Dychtwald says.

“But in the meantime, there will be a whole lot of people ailing and suffering,” he warns.

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