

Successful Aging and the Humility of Perspective

For anyone familiar with Indiana only from a distance, Turkey Run State Park is an anomaly. In a state equated with flat rural farmland, a visitor does not expect to find an old growth forest and sandstone gorges embedded with prehistoric sea creatures. Yet, when one takes the perspective of geologic time and glacial forces, the incongruous topography makes more sense. A few hundred million years ago, central Indiana was a rainforest at the mouth of an ancient river emptying into an ancient ocean. Time and experience can change our expectations and broaden our perspective. We invited 100 scientists to Turkey Run State Park for the Eighth Biennial Regenstrief Conference to enrich our perspective on successful aging.

The Regenstrief Institute in Indianapolis, Indiana, originally designed these conferences as retreats. The program challenges attendees to examine their assumptions through oral presentations, informal social discussions, and reflective walks with colleagues along primordial trails. The papers in this supplement represent the oral presentations delivered at the conference and are infused with the spirit of discourse at the retreat. We planned this conference with an ambitious agenda to examine past research on successful aging, identify the edge of the water in this research, and map the most promising pathways for moving forward. To facilitate the possibility that participants might achieve a new perspective, we assembled a group of scientists whose paths typically do not cross: They work in separate laboratories using different methods and publish in disparate journals.

One key, albeit risky, goal of this conference was to facilitate the intermingling of these diverse scientists so they might reflect on the potential for a more integrated research agenda. By *integrative*, we mean one that embraces the multiple determinants of health. As the reader will find in reviewing this supplement, each scientist is attempting to describe the prospects and limitations of his or her narrower perspective, while also attempting to open his or her eyes to the entire landscape of the determinants of successful aging. This is the scientific equivalent of thinking globally and acting locally. This admixture of scientists produced a humility of perspective befitting the setting of a primeval rainforest surrounded by Midwest cornfields. This humility of perspective is captured in three themes that recur throughout the papers in this supplement: the limitations of a narrow perspective, the challenge of complexity, and the boundaries of medical care.

THE LIMITATIONS OF A NARROW PERSPECTIVE

The first limitation of a narrow perspective revealed at the conference was the protean definition of *successful aging*. For some scientists, health is the most important component of successful aging. The design of the Eighth Biennial Regenstrief Conference originated from the determinants

of health model (1). Although this model incorporates determinants beyond medical care, the focus is still on health. Not all scientists recognize health as the most important feature of successful aging. To a humanist, health may be less relevant than realizing one's ambitions or helping a fellow human being to achieve his or her ambitions—neither necessarily requires health or longevity. If someone fulfilled the dreams of a nation, yet died of lung disease at age 50 years, is that successful aging? Can we optimize successful aging of the individual to the point of damaging the health of the community? Can one age successfully but die unsuccessfully? It is easy to get lost in the forest of such existential debate, yet an overly simplistic medical care model is equally misleading. We challenged each contributor of this supplement to communicate how his or her area of research contributes to successful aging. Some believe that the contribution of their area is so obvious and so important that such explanations are self-evident. Other eminent scientists hearing the same presentation might pronounce the topic to be of limited relevance to successful aging.

The second limitation of a narrow perspective revealed at this conference was the many well-designed and well-intentioned health care interventions over the past half-century that produced unanticipated results. Many scientists asked to present at this conference were speaking from the perspective of an entire career of research. These seasoned researchers possess the humility and humor to reveal how an incomplete framework produced unexpected findings. Nowhere are these unexpected results more common than in interventions seeking to change patient or provider behavior. In the typical progression of this research, the first intervention is a relatively passive provision of educational information in wonderfully creative formats. Scientists follow this passive approach with sequential studies of ever-increasing enabling strategies that tend to reach the flat of the curve as they begin to encroach on professional autonomy, personal liberty, or excessive costs.

THE CHALLENGE OF COMPLEXITY

Simply recognizing the limitation of a narrow perspective does not mean that we have the tools to embrace the broader, more complex perspective. The challenge of complexity often conflicts with the efficiency of a biomedical research model that requires reductionism. Even when scientists think globally, acting locally requires them to choose a focus. The vagaries of research funding and academic promotion also demand a research focus. In general, scientists can choose either breadth or depth but not both. In perusing the titles of the papers presented at this conference, the reader will see that we have attempted to represent research on the main posited components of the determinants of health: biology, medical care, lifestyle be-

haviors, and social and physical environment. However, each of these determinants of health actually encompasses a complex set of interrelated factors, and exploring these factors in a typical research study requires us to limit complexity. We need a whole science of new methods for analysis, measurement, and integrative research to better embrace complexity. The new science of complexity is just beginning to influence research on successful aging, but it offers great promise.

THE BOUNDARIES OF MEDICAL CARE

Medical care is only one determinant of health. Excess expenditures on medical care can result in poorer health outcomes if a society ignores the other determinants. In the Institute of Medicine's report "The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century," the authors state that although as much as 95% of health care spending goes to medical care and biomedical research, lifestyle behavior and environment are responsible for more than 70% of avoidable mortality. The report adds that "the benefits of our current investments in health care are inaccessible to many due to lack of insurance or access to services" (2). Several of the conference papers address these other determinants of health and the imbalance in the United States' research portfolio. Medical care has clear boundaries in its potential effect on the nation's health, and it also has boundaries in its reach into people's lives. Simply medicalizing social problems is an unwelcome solution to the current imbalance. There is an unsettling gray zone between promoting a healthy lifestyle and legislating acceptable behaviors. An overzealous focus on personal behavior risks blaming the individual for avoidable maladies. In some of the papers presented at the conference, we see the temptation to alter human behavior through increasingly powerful interventions. At some point, people begin to push back at the intrusiveness of these actions.

CONCLUSIONS

In highlighting the humility of perspective and the three component themes, we emphasize humility rather than cynicism. Cynicism produces scorn and mockery rather than hope and collegiality. Some of the papers in this supplement discuss the humbling experience of expensive studies that failed to achieve the expected outcome. Other papers present the limitations of methodologic innovations or public health initiatives. Lessons learned from these studies provide the foundation for the next generation of scientists. One lesson learned at the conference is that humility of perspective can provide a common ground for interdisciplinary and integrative research. We hope that these papers offer readers a new perspective for research on aging in the 21st century.

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