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A NEED FOR CONCERN

AGING AND ENVIRONMENT: CHALLENGES FOR THE 70'S
by Ruth G. Bennett, Ph.D.

HELP WANTED FOR A NEW AGE
by John B. Martin

TO SERVE AND BE SERVED
by Phoebe Steffey

THE LIGHT SIDE

YOUTH WHO SHARE AND CARE

MARY JANE DOGS
by Shirley Barrett

A BRIGHTER CHRISTMAS
by Sheila K. Hollander

HANDS AND WORDS IN SPECIAL SERVICE

EVERY BLOOD TYPE IS THE RIGHT TYPE

American Red Cross Careers: ... BUT WHAT'S THERE TO DO BETWEEN DISASTERS?
by Jan K. Walker

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AGING
AND
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CHALLENGES
FOR
THE 70'S
by RUTH G. BENNETT, Ph.D.
NEW FRONTIERS OF SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY and endeavor are continually opening up. Today, ecology, the scientific study of the natural environment, has become a popular subject for discussion and research. Similarly, gerontology, the scientific study of aging, has begun to stimulate interest among scientists and laymen alike.

There is nothing miraculous about the simultaneous development of these two fields. They both deal with problems that have plagued mankind for thousands of years, and a closer look reveals that these two new fields do have a great deal in common.

Ecology and gerontology both require a great deal of cooperation from persons in a number of new fields. Without the help of the specialists in these new fields, the problems associated with aging or with the environment could not be tackled. For instance, among those who call themselves ecologists are biologists, biochemists, physiologists, physicists, engineers and social scientists. For gerontology, the list is not dissimilar, although contributing fields might be listed differently in order of importance. In ecology the natural sciences predominate while in gerontology, behavioral and social sciences head the list.

In both fields, applied research, the results of which may readily be put into practice, is better developed than is basic research. This fact makes both fields attractive to scientists, for real satisfaction can be found in being able to assist in utilizing the results of laboratory or field research. Today, many scientists are helping to formulate and apply new policies based on their research. Ecologists are working on policies regarding air and water pollution, chemical and biological weapons, and overpopulation. Gerontologists are working on policies regarding social security, retirement and delivery of medical services.

The similarities between ecology and gerontology probably do not end there. Undoubtedly, there are others. But even more intriguing than their similarities are the areas of overlap between ecology and gerontology. Some gerontologists contend that aging results from environments which are not congenial to man. Therefore, if we improve our environment, according to their contention, we can eliminate aging. In an ideal setting, a Shangri-La, that imposes no stresses, that knows no illness, that is clean and where food is healthful, people might live to an extreme old age without developing the signs of bodily wear and tear. In such a place, there would be no mental deterioration, no arteriovascular changes, no facial lines, wrinkles or white hair. The dream of locating a fountain of youth continues to inspire scientists.

SOME FACTS ARE KNOWN ABOUT THE negative effects of some features of the natural and physical environment on the aging process. For example, overexposure to the sun’s rays and to other forms of radiation, causes skin to age and may result in harmful skin cell growth and degeneration. It is also known that when air pollution reaches a dangerous level, more infants and old people die than when pollution rates are low.

But we need to know more about the effects of the psychological and social stresses imposed by environments such as isolation, crowding, rapid social change and poverty. Recently, we found that the social isolation experienced by many old people seems to prevent the type of learning needed for social adjustment. Social isolation results from a series of events occurring commonly in the lives of the elderly. These events, each of which is usually beyond the control of any single individual, include mandatory retirement, less frequent contact with young family members because of their greater mobility, the deaths of friends and relatives and the exclusion from clubs and organizations. My own research has shown that some isolated old people are unable to learn
the information, the new attitudes and behaviors, that are needed to adapt to everyday experiences such as neighborhood changes, relocation, housing improvements, and the introduction of new medical and social services. These old people may be called "desocialized," and some may never improve their lot. However, others may be able to acquire new information, for example, by relocating to a retirement community where they can share the experience of a group. The stimulation provided by moving to a new place and associating with others seems to inspire learning. Thus, while you may not be able to teach "new tricks to one old dog" that has been isolated, a group of "old dogs" may learn a great deal together.

SOCIAL ISOLATION IS A CULTURALLY generated stress inflicted on the elderly that is not shared by most young persons. However, it is not the only unpleasant experience they are forced to endure. With many younger people, they face poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, community disintegration and the stresses caused by rapid technological change. In spite of these common problems the young reject the old. They view the elderly as incapable of solving problems, rigid, conservative and dependent. Worse, the aged are viewed as useless, as drains on scarce resources and as excess baggage. Rather than allying themselves with the old to solve social problems, the young exclude them. As a result, elderly persons often continue to withdraw to the extremes of alienation and depths of depression. Effect becomes cause in a vicious cycle in which enforced isolation leads to lowered ability to learn, resulting in continued exclusion and further losses of ability. But one thing is certain: everyone grows old. Should today's tendency to exclude the aged continue, those who are young today may encounter even more painful experiences than are currently imaginable.

There is a need to think about both the present and the future, in order to improve the quality of life of older people. One approach is to reintegrate them into the mainstream of social life by developing meaningful roles for them. The Friendly Visitor Program cosponsored by Columbia University and the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene encourages young and old alike to volunteer to visit with old people residing on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Elderly persons are called on regularly by a pair of visitors over a specified time period. By making one pair of visitors responsible for all visits to a given individual, friendships develop with time. Apart from regular visiting, no other services are rendered. Thus far, we have observed a desire and willingness on the part of those visited to try to solve their own problems. We also have noticed improvements in grooming and apartment upkeep as well as increased social activity. Should such improvements continue, we hope to expand this experimental program to other cities as well as into rural communities.

It seems clear that the elderly are highly sensitive to their natural and social environment. While a cure for aging is nowhere in sight, our growing ability to control the environment may help eliminate or prevent some debilitating aspects of aging. The search for an unstressful environment in which to mature did not begin yesterday in our youth culture. For centuries, man has dreamed of an ideal setting within which eternal youth is guaranteed. While we have not yet found it, environmental scientists and gerontologists together may unearth the path.

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