

# CARING FOR THE ELDERLY IN THE SOCIETY: A SINE QUA NON FOR LONGEVITY

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## **Abstract**

Rehabilitation of the elderly has been an area, which is yet to receive adequate attention by special educators. It is pertinent for everybody to be knowledgeable of how to use his/her time and manage his/her health properly. Many workers suffer from various health impairments that can lead to their inability to perform their duties or even premature death. At the same time, many aged waste away in their homes as a result of inadequate care. It is the focus of this paper to examine the process of ageing, look into the diseases as well as the environmental factors that result into premature ageing. Suggestions have been made about how people should maintain their health for increased longevity while rehabilitating the ageing in the most conducive environment.

## **Introduction**

Rehabilitation of the adults and the elderly is a process of helping the elderly to regain the youthful capabilities, which they have lost in the process of ageing to a certain extent. It also refers to therapeutic efforts geared towards the restoration of the elderly to a certain level of functionality. In addition, it refers to restorative programmes making the elderly and adults function without being handicapped by the physical changes that the process of ageing could have at helping the elderly to be independent to a certain level of functionality. This would to a certain extent ensure that they would **not** be dependent on others such that they will still exhibit the capability of trudging on with the challenges despite the fact that they have lost greater degree of the physical strength and vigor of the youth ages.

Human life can be viewed from the cycle of the day. The day starts with the period of twilight, which is the earliest part of the morning. This gradually moves to the period of dawn, which is the period of the first appearance of sunlight in the sky. It is the beginning of the day and life. When the sun is ahead and shines brightly with all its beauty, we have the long period of daylight, which is the afternoon. Gradually, the day moves into the period of dusk, which is the evening and night period.

The day is a cycle of sunrise, sunshine and sunset. The period of sunrise is the morning while the sunshine is the afternoon while the sunset moves the day into the evening and night period. The inference of the life span of man that can be drawn from this *is* that, man emerges from a foetus as a newborn baby like a sun, which appears into life stage as a twilight not conspicuous for recognition by everyone in the world to which he is born. He rapidly matures into a being well recognized as a child, a hope for brighter tomorrow, who suddenly matures into a charming youth growing into a full grown adult. The period of youth and adulthood is the period of a great fulfillment, which is the period of the day, the sunshine phase of every human being. Man in all ramifications keep on making a remarkable achievement that signifies beauty and "rising to shine"<sup>1</sup>. While man is still admired by the whole world as a charming young man, he matures unnoticeably and gradually, anatomically and physiologically. This is to say that, this sunshine is gradually rolling into sun-setting phase of old age. This becomes gradually noticeable during the middle age and thereafter, depending on the genetic nature of the individual and environmental factors.

## **Process of Ageing**

The process of ageing is the act of getting old. As man is one day older following the normal trend of the stages of growth and development, he is gradually reducing his life span by one day. Ageing is a continuous irreparable and irreversible process, which can be managed through healthy rehabilitative efforts.

Falaye (1998), tracing the sequential stages of human development tagged age 65 years as the beginning of decline and senescence. According to him "Though many believe that old age begins at 65, behavioural and bio - medical studies have indicated that ageing is a lifelong process". Bromley (1960), in

Falaye (1998) tagged 70 years as the old age. While Aina (1995), observed that, ageing occurs with the passage of time because the process is slow and symptomless and varies from one person to another. World Health Organization (WHO) defines old age to start from 60 years. To some, 65 years is to be elderly and to be aged or very old is 75 years. Thus, world - wide. 60 - 65 years is the retirement age because it is observed, that is the age man declines in productivity,

Busse (1989), cited in Town send, (1993), identified the following theories of ageing:

1. The Exhaustion Theory - This theory suggests that the body contains a finite amount of energy that is gradually used up over time. When the energy is gone, the body dies.
2. The Accumulation Theory - According to this theory, harmful materials such as lipofuscin, develops late in life and destroys cells.
3. The Biological Programming Theory - This theory says that cells are genetically programmed to live for a specific period leading to inevitable death, etc. Thus, pointing to the fact that the life of man must definitely come to an end one day.

At old age, it is observed that sight becomes dimmer and the elderly complain of blurred vision. The process of ageing also affects the sense of taste, thus, the aged adds larger quantity of salt than necessary, he drinks hot pap or tea without feeling any burn on his tongue. There is reduced sensitivity to thirst and so elderly ones drink less water, which may cause dehydration. Lamy (1986), established that, the elderly dislike drinking water when so much is taken away with age, including the inability to hear and to communicate with others, the resulting isolation and depression can counteract the physical capability to live (Mull, 1977). Human structures gradually wear off, weaken and suddenly stop working just like a commonly used mechanical machine.

### **Factors Affecting Ageing**

1. *Drugs*: The elderly are accused pi engaging themselves in self— medication which may be dangerous to their health. It has been noticed that many elderly people in Nigeria are dependent on at least one drug per day to enable them function adequately since they are often frail with precarious homeostatis, more drugs are hazardous to them, Most children who live far away from their parents send drugs home to serve as medication for their aged parents. The drugs might be misused leading to further complications of the aged. In addition, aged people favour drugs prescribed to them by their friends. Such drugs have no adequate dosages and when used they speed ageing or complicate the condition of the aged.
2. *Diseases*: Incessant ill health will hasten ageing. Debilitating diseases such as diabetes, arthritis, asthma, hypertension, cancer, tuberculosis are associated with old age. Some aged people are affected with one or another disease mentioned above. It should be noted however that such very uneasily managed illness that have to force patients to live on drugs do speed ageing,

*Unhealthy Living Lifestyles*: Diseases of various forms and degrees do force an individual to look older than their age. Unfortunately, lifestyles inform of womanising, smoking, snuffing, tobacco dependency on alcohol, cocaine, Indian hemp, heroine and various intravenous narcotic drugs do work negatively on the brain, the body systems and thus, speed early ageing. *Environmental Pollution*: Developing countries like Nigeria where environmental policies are not strongly in force exposes their citizens to hazards of environmental pollution. Environmental pollution includes water pollution, air pollution, chemical pollution, chemical land pollution. The use of chemicals on agricultural produce the evolution of synthetic food and drugs intake. The •unprotected toxic waste disposals, the unprotected ejection of missiles are very hazardous to human health because they work negatively on the delicate biological compositions of man. They destabilize nature's work in man and thus, result into speedy ageing in modern man. A lot of the big towns in Nigeria like Kano, Lagos, Ibadan, Onitsha to mention a few have problems of pollution of water, air, etc. all around them. This is dangerous to health.

*Stress*: Too much pre - occupation with problems especially where such problems are not shared with other persons may cause unnecessary phobia, stress, tension and anxiety. In extreme cases, palpitation may manifest which may affect the body functioning, causing pathological symptoms that may speed ageing in the victim. It may cause untimely death. Stress, over anxiety causes tension, which may develop into hypertension, which may speed ageing or cause sudden death. Awake, March 22, 1998

described stress as "The Silent Killer".

*Accident:* Physical injuries sustained through accidents may cause disabilities that can incapacitate the individual or confine him to the bed or indoors for a very long period of time. In some cases, prolonged confinement, which restricts activities of parts of the body, may cause physical inactivity, which could cause early ageing of body organs. Such individuals may look older than their actual age.

*Overworking:* Rest is very good and important to good health. Work is good for good health; it makes one look fit. Though the body needs work to keep body and soul together, overworking without resting causes stress, which hastens ageing. The body needs appropriate quantity of healthy recreation, relaxation after overworking the body to enhance longevity. A lot of people in Nigeria overwork themselves on a daily basis. They refuse to rest because of the "Get rich quick" syndrome. They run about helter — skelter doing one business or the other and this has resulted in numerous cases of hypertension and strokes even among the youths.

### **Illness Associated with Ageing**

- (i) *Amnesia:* This refers to partial or total loss of memory. Forgetfulness is common among the aged,
- (ii) *Dementia:* This is psychiatric disorder associated with loss of power of thinking due to brain disease or injury. It is characterized by feeble mindedness that manifests as if one is an Imbecile.
- (iii) *Arthritis:* It is a rheumatoid disease that is common with old age. It is characterized by inflammation of the joints (knee, ankle, elbow, etc.) coupled with severe unbearable joint pains.

Other common diseases of the aged are cardiovascular disease, which Lamy (1986), noted as a condition whereby there is reduction of the output of blood from the heart of the aged. Asthma which is a chronic respiratory disorder characterized by wheezing and difficulty in breathing. It is observed that asthma attacks the elderly even when they never experienced an attack at their younger days.

Insomnia which is sleeplessness or wakefulness and it is commonly the complaint of the elderly. The elderly are more pre - occupied about the problems facing their offspring such as marriage failures, job insecurity, childlessness, etc.

Pneumonia; ageing makes the elderly frail and very sensitive to cold. Also, Alzheimer's disease: Awake, September 22, described it as "The Major chronic illness of old age" which causes stress. It is also the fourth biggest killer in the developed world after heart disease, cancer and stroke.

### **Suggestions**

1. Regular educative enlightenment programmes about exercises for the adult, their type of diet that is suitable for the adult should be the focus of the mass media.
2. Adults should be extra vigilant on their aged parents in their medication to avoid drug dependency.
3. Seminars should be organized by adult educators to familiarize the elderly with all the necessary precautions they should take and how to live well.
4. Right from the primary school., the subject titled "Living Well" should be included on the school curriculum. This also includes the course contents of all tertiary institutions. Students should be knowledgeable about how to live well to avoid problem in their old age.
5. There should be provision in all states by the government to establish old people's home where old people could be housed comfortably with adequate facilities as regards their meals, exercises, medical facilities. Their relations should be encouraged to visit them regularly.

Many old people suffer loneliness but if placed in an old people's home they will be able to relate with their peers and loneliness will become a thing of the past. In addition, as workers are transferred to various places, the minds of such workers will be at peace if they know that their aged are in safe hands.

## **Conclusion**

We have closely seen the life of man, which can be likened to that of a candlestick! A newly bought candle is long, fresh, smooth and erect. When lit, it illuminates the immediate environment and gradually burns until it becomes truncated, bent and tending to fall on a particular side. It gradually becomes shorter and shorter until the last part of the wick is burnt completely. As a newborn child grows into maturity, it tends to gradually wears out until ageing becomes noticeable. Man burns out by stress of life, the stressors gradually deforms the physical appearance of man and thus, weakens man, bending man physically and physiologically until man burns out the last strength in him and dies. Before the final death, man goes through the process of ageing and as man goes through this process, care must be taken to avoid factors affecting ageing so that people will stay fit for a long period before becoming aged. It should be noted however that everybody should be made to understand that death is an inevitable end for human beings and so drug dependency and addiction are injurious to health and do cause dissipation of human life sustaining organs and thus, cause early ageing.

Care should be taken to handle cases of associated illnesses of the aged by qualified professionals. Indeed, the youths have to be loved by their parents and well cared for to avoid misuse of drugs among them which can eventually lead to premature ageing.

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