

Preparing for Population Aging

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Man's centuries-old population pyramid is turning upside down. By the year 2025, more than one billion people over 60 will inhabit the planet, and, for the first time in human history, they will outnumber the young in many countries, according to a recent United Nations report.

"Until this century - and to be more exact, the second quarter of this century - there were far too few people who lived into their 60s to constitute a true age group," said William M. Kerrigan, secretary general of the United Nations -sponsored World Assembly on Aging, which recently met in Vienna, Austria. "It is only now that life expectancy has increased that this new age group is identifiable." The UN report indicates that the sharpest effects of population aging will be felt in developing countries. Today, their populations are strikingly young, with up to 50 percent under age 25. By 2025, however, almost three-quarters of the world's over 60s are projected to be living in the Third World. If those projections hold true, countries like Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico and Nigeria will see their over-60 populations increase by as much as 15 times their 1950 levels.

Aging populations are certain to have enormous impact on the economic and social fabric of society. The industrialized countries, which were the first to fix retirement ages and to arrange pension schemes, already are feeling the pinch. In the United States, for example, the ratio of workers to pensioners has slid from 16 to one in 1950 to 3.2 to one today. By the year 2025, it is projected to be two to one.

The World Assembly on Aging was created to develop responses to the challenges posed by rapidly increasing numbers of elderly people throughout the world. A total of 121 countries were represented at the recent two-week conference in Vienna, and International Plan of Action was adopted to serve as a guide for governments in dealing with problems brought about by population aging.

In addition to the Plan of Action, the Assembly's general debate included discussions on demographic trends, conditions of the aging population in various regions of the world and ways to improve the quality of life of the elderly.

The Assembly's work will be carried on through a Trust Fund, which was established with an initial contribution from Lederle Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company presently involved in an intensive research program on mental aging.

The pharmaceutical industry is playing a key role in preparing for population aging. While government must wrestle with the social, economic and political challenges, pharmaceutical companies are working not only to prolong life, but to improve the health and thus the quality of life, of the elderly as well. Pharmaceutical companies are making great strides in development of drugs for the treatment of diseases that often strike the elderly such as cancer, arthritis and heart disease.

In addition to such work, Lederle Laboratories also is presently involved in a significant program researching mental aging. Early efforts in this fascinating area already have revealed valuable information as to the cause - and potential treatment - of near-term memory loss associated with aging brain cells.

While the phenomenon of population aging is hailed as a triumph of human development, it also poses its own set of problems and challenges. Officials of the World Assembly on Aging want the world to realize that the search for solutions cannot wait.

"The elderly of the future are already among us, and unless we do something about the problem of aging today, they will reappear with a vengeance tomorrow," Kerrigan said. "We must search for alternatives that stress the productive involvement of the aged, not just their protection and care." Kerrigan's concern for rapid action is obviously justified. The over-60s of the year 2025 are here now and are present in great number today -all those aged 17 and over - and every one of us is a potential

member of this new human age group.