

Frailty is a preventable part of growing old

By Helen Dennis

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Dear Readers:

I had the opportunity to interview one of the most distinguished scientific experts on aging and longevity - geriatrician Dr. Walter M. Bortz, clinical professor of medicine at Stanford University and past president of the American Geriatrics Society.

Bortz will be giving the Fifth Annual Stephen R. Lemkin, M.D., Memorial lecture Oct. 6 at Torrance Memorial Medical Center.

The author of four books and 150 scientific articles, Bortz is often referred to as the guru of growing old.

Much of his research has focused on the importance of physical exercise in the promotion of robust aging. At 78, he is planning to run his 38th marathon in New York.

Here's a bit of history:

Bortz's father was a Harvard-trained physician who was a good friend of Ethel Percy Andrus, an educator, founder of AARP and the National Retired Teachers Association, and namesake of USC's Andrus Gerontology Center. Bortz sat repeatedly at the same table with his father and Andrus as his father delivered perspectives on aging.

When his father died, Bortz became clinically depressed. To overcome his profound sadness, he started to run. So began his running life, superimposed on his interest in aging. Bortz said his belief and research affirmed that exercise is related to longevity.

"We have all the data we ever need," he said. "The key is how to get people to do it (exercise) as Americans (continue to get) fatter and lazier."

Many believe that aging is a disease. Bortz disagrees. He emphasizes that the "real disease" of aging is frailty, a condition that can be prevented.

Since normal aging is not a disease in the traditional sense, it does not lend itself to surgery or pills. Yet the current model of medicine is geared to illness, not health and prevention.

"And (the medical community) wants you to be sick," Bortz said. "Every sick time is a country-club payment."

I was curious about his thoughts on the anti-aging movement and the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine (A4M), which claims a membership of 18,000 physicians, scientists and health professionals in 85 countries.

A4M's orientation is to look at aging as a disease that can be reversed. But Bortz's opinion is that "aging is ordained, it cannot be reversed.

"To run time backwards is absurd," he said.

He noted that A4M's report of research study results are selective. Physicians are motivated to join the anti-aging organization, he said, because of the financial rewards of providing treatments and remedies that allegedly reverse aging.

Avoiding frailty is the key. And to avoid frailty it's important to take care of ourselves, Bortz emphasizes.

Diet: "The most important aspect of diet is exercise," Bortz said. "We're all zoo animals, born free. We ate everything on the Serengeti. If you move, you can eat lard."

Attitude: In his book "Dare to be 100" (Fireside, 1996), Bortz outlines 99 ways to live to be 100. Which is the most important? Believing that you can live to be 100, he said. "Aging is a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Exercise: According to Bortz, we can prevent becoming physically weak in older age by exercising. The "use it or lose it" notion is backed by extensive research.

I asked, "What is the greatest age challenge facing our nation?"

"Validating that being 100 years old is good, that it is our birthright," Bortz said. "Our birth certificate has an end date of 100 years. It's valid and a choice. (Each of us) must work on it."

Bortz added that the goal will become more attractive once we have prevention and cures for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

Change agents in the field of aging often are confronted with convincing the public to accept the validity and relevance of their data and then having individuals apply the new knowledge to their own lives. Sometimes these pioneers make broad statements to focus attention on the issues.

Bortz does that, and it's OK. Yes, we know doctors who promote healthy behaviors, and midlife and older adults who take care of themselves. We know individuals who have "done all the right things" and still have had their lives cut short by disease, or suffer limitations from chronic conditions.

As a nation, however, our work is cut out for us.

Our medical system does not identify frailty as the preventable and fixable part of aging. It does not promote frailty prevention or reward healthy behaviors - as the 85-plus age group becomes the fastest growing segment of our society and as Americans become more sedentary and obese.

Bortz's message, research and life example are profound gifts that validate the human potential in each of us. Let's not settle and let's get moving.

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Helen Dennis is a specialist in aging, with academic, corporate and nonprofit experience. Send her your questions and concerns in care of the Daily Breeze, 5215 Torrance Blvd., Torrance, CA 90503-4077; or fax to 310-540-7581, or e-mail to features@dailybreeze.com.

WANT TO GO?

DR. WALTER M. BORTZ

When: 7 p.m. Oct. 6.

Where: Torrance Memorial Medical Center, 3330 Lomita Blvd.

Admission: Free.

Reservations: (310) 517-4711.