

Science Takes Aim at Elders' Frailty

BY Dave Andrusko

A story that appeared in the Boston Globe offered some wonderful news captured in the headline of Alice Dembner's story, "Science Gaining on Elders' Frailty."

Frailty—a "weakened condition that often leads to disability, hospitalization, and death"—affects millions of elderly Americans. "Researchers estimate that at least 7 percent of those over 65 are frail, and about 20 percent of those over 80," Dembner writes.

If it can be treated (or prevented), the impact would be almost incalculable.

Although Dembner does not directly address it in this article, the "weakness, exhaustion, and weight loss typical of frailty" is a fertile ground for depression, the kind that can weigh an elderly person down and offer an opening for those who whisper in their ears that their life is "not worth living." If older people can avoid frailty it would also reduce the cost of care, the stick that "quality of life" bioethicists use to beat those of us who subscribe to the equality of life ethos over the head.

The impetus for much of the research, not surprisingly, is the much-discussed "aging" of the population. The demographic implications of a much older population are obvious.

Dembner's opening paragraph is important, substantively and symbolically. "Throw out another convention of old age," she writes. "Researchers are finding that frailty may not be the inevitable result of aging but rather is a preventable and perhaps treatable condition."

What wasn't obvious, at least to me, was how much work is already going on or how differently frailty is now viewed.

"A number of leading researchers in the field, including Dr. Lewis Lipsitz, vice president for academic medicine at Hebrew SeniorLife, believe the underlying causes of frailty are a breakdown in many of the biological systems that keep humans healthy—those that protect us from disease, that control the makeup of blood, and that maintain muscle strength," Dembner writes. Often the result is a loss of physical resiliency. "'Frailty is where any new thing that comes along is going to topple you over,' Lipsitz said."

Physical exercise, as you would expect, is a key component of any strategy to reduce, if not ward off, frailty. Drugs are also being developed that are aimed at specific symptoms, such as muscle weakness.

For example, "Several major drug companies are testing medicines designed to stimulate growth hormones to see if they can promote increases in muscle mass and strength," according to Dembner. Other studies attempt to prevent muscles from wasting away in the first place.

And there is "Yet another avenue that scientists say may prove fruitful," Dembner writes: ACE inhibitors, drugs to control blood pressure that many seniors already take. "Two studies of

patients taking the drugs for their hearts found they were stronger and more vigorous than those taking other blood pressure medications," Dembner writes.

While it may be optimistic, the comments of Dr. Thomas Gill, a professor of medicine at Yale University, are greatly encouraging. "I suspect that within a decade, there will be some treatments," he said.