

Wyoming Tribune Eagle column of January 21, 2015. Editor's headline: "Taking care of your body can beat 'aging dilemma'"

Casper Star Tribune, January 24: "Don't wait to make good choices while aging"

As someone who moves inexorably toward "older" I'd prefer not to examine this country's "aging dilemma." I'd rather peruse AARP bulletins that reiterate the right to Social Security and Medicare: Did we not pay into it as into a life-insurance fund? If the system has a bit of a solvency problem, surely it's nothing major?

Shaking us from our comfort zones are books like "The Clash of Generations" and its predecessor, "The Coming Generational Storm," whose authors state bluntly that today's oldsters live at the expense of future generations. Bad things do happen to good countries, write Laurence Kotlikoff and Scott Burns, and this country is heading into "one God-awful fiscal storm."

Thirty years from now, today's Milleninals will see a government in desperate trouble. A country where walkers outnumber strollers; a country with twice as many retirees but only 15 percent more workers to support them.

Already our government owes billions around the world, having long ceased to be a creditor nation. Unless we embark on substantial sacrifices right now, our children and their children will face a fiscal abyss. Yet the lobbying power of Gray Panthers makes sure that Congress continues to kick the can down the road. Medicare lobbying managed to water down aspects of the Affordable Care Act it deemed disadvantageous to its constituency.

I dislike AARP publications on a number of fronts, not least for its full-page ads for "help" devices and services that make aging seem a hobbled lurch into decrepit existence. Its reportage often features some exotic disease and the thousands, tens of thousands of drug treatment. Nary a whisper that readers take steps toward a more healthful existence through regular exercise, improved nutrition, and sensible eating habits.

Flawed social and economic institutions encourage poor individual behavior. The longevity of our generation is hitched to unrealistic expectations of medical miracles. What of our destructive habits of overeating, too much drinking, taking pills, staying up nights, driving too fast, smoking cigarettes? These may be borne of stress and anxiety, yet they, too, drive up healthcare costs. And the habits are hardly limited to oldsters.

The idea of personal responsibility has been submerged to individual rights—rights and demands to be guaranteed by government and delivered by public and private institutions, argues Paul Roberts in "The Impulse Society." Contrary to some European countries' health coverage, our governmental efforts—Medicare and Medicaid, both enacted in 1965—were intended mainly to "fill the gaps left by a large health insurance business." However, because Medicare and Medicaid

reimbursed hospitals and doctors at market rates, “Congress had removed much of the discipline in the marketplace supplying that health care.”

Generous coverage spurred rapid, if costly, advances in treatment and technologies. Today, even terminal illness is often seen as a market opportunity. Unlike in European countries, in the U.S., “palliative care is almost an afterthought.” Here, the emphasis is on “heroic, late-stage, usually quite expensive treatment.”

Our healthcare system, Roberts asserts, is one that “not only doesn’t protect people from bad choices, but encourages those bad choices, and indeed, requires them for profit.” The aim should be the health of a people, not the sale of more medical services and drugs, yet preventive measures, like diet and exercise, get short shrift. “The goal isn’t actually health but health care—that is, treatment for illness.”

What’s a body to do? A line from a song goes through my mind, “Sometimes I get a great notion / to jump in the river and drown.”

There is another way. “The Coming Generational Storm” urges—indeed, demonstrates how—to take a hard look at our assets: financial, personal, household, etc. But we should also examine our “health assets,” our “health capital.”

Personal responsibility and engagement function at multiple levels, its authors assert. When we “improve our health and finances at the level of personal habit,” we simultaneously “improve the health care delivery system.”

For example, refraining from smoking averts lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, circulatory and heart problems. Certain disabilities, protracted illnesses, and premature deaths “can be traced directly to smoking.”

The same goes for obesity. Avoiding corpulence and involving ourselves with regular exercise will forestall diabetes, colorectal cancer, heart problems, joint problems, and more. Not to mention, our kids will love us for it.

Engaging in preventive measures also reduces stress. Thus we may avoid lengthy, traumatic hospital stays and out-of-reach drugs. Instead of staking our hopes on miracle cures that are likely to turn into invasive treatment, let’s be proactive in our health concerns. Let’s not sit and wait until we’re too ill to make good choices. Acting on behalf of the body may not solve our nation’s fiscal dilemma, but it will solve its “aging dilemma” one individual at a time.