

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Lifespan Slowing Increasing in America”

Recently, researchers predicted that by 2040, people the world over will be living longer. In extreme cases, such as Syria and Nigeria, the researchers projected life expectancy to increase by as many as 10 years. But in the United States, they estimated that it will rise by only 1.1 year—putting the United States in the bottom five of all countries in terms of life expectancy growth by 2040. In 2016, the United States ranked 43rd among all nations’ life expectancies, with an average lifespan of 78.7 years. But in 2040, life expectancy in the United States is forecast to be only 79.8 years, falling to a rank of 64th among all nations—the biggest drop in rank among high-income countries. China ranked 68th in 2016, with an average life expectancy of 76.3 years. But if trends continue through 2040, China could rise to a rank of 39th, with an average life expectancy of 81.9 years—a 5.6-year increase in lifespan. So, what is holding us back? Researchers anticipate a coming shift in premature death from communicable to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), chronic kidney disease, and lung cancer and problems related to obesity. However, people can still learn to make changes to avoid these outcomes. For example, one bright spot for the United States was that it was one of only 20 countries that reduced the population’s risk of exposure to tobacco faster than 2% between 1990 and 2016. The future of the world’s health is not preordained. Experts say that the top three health drivers behind the future trajectory for early death will be metabolic factors—high blood pressure, high body mass index, and high blood sugar. Other top drivers of premature mortality will be tobacco and alcohol use, and air pollution. These changes will have a serious impact on the allocation of health care resources. Studies show that the future is highly malleable, but also requires concerted attention and continued prioritization of the key drivers of health. Please keep in mind the in the United States, suicide is twice as common as homicide—and more often involves firearms—but public perception is just the opposite. Knowing that the presence of a firearm increases the risk for suicide, and that firearm suicide is substantially more common than firearm homicide, may lead people to think twice about whether or not firearm ownership and their storage practices are really the safest options for them and their household. Also, humans are the only species in which one sex (females) is known to have a ubiquitous survival advantage.

In the America that I love, we still have the opportunity to alter our lives to increase our lifespan.

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