

Longevity Science

Interview with Jay Olshansky

KYLE JENSEN: Welcome to SAGE Crossroads, the premier online forum in issues of human aging. These podcasts feature lively discussion with the experts on the ethical, political, economic, scientific, and societal implications of aging-related science. Thank you for listening.

I'm joined now with Dr. Jay Olshansky. Dr. Olshansky is a professor at the University of Illinois Chicago's School of Public Health.

Dr. Olshansky, in your opinion is the United States' economy ready for an aging population?

JAY OLSHANSKY: Well, the whole world is ready for an aging population, I think. One perspective people have is that aging is associated with gloom and doom. In fact, if you look at it, I think aging should be thought of as an opportunity. It shouldn't be thought of as something bad; it should be thought of something that is economically beneficial.

KYLE JENSEN: What are some specific economic benefits that you see in having a population that is living longer?

JAY OLSHANSKY: Actually, living longer in itself would not provide a benefit, but living healthier longer would. I think that's what we are talking about in the world of science today is an effort to extend the duration of healthy life. If indeed that happens, people in all likelihood would first of all be sick for a shorter time period, so they would be drawing less money from Medicare and less money from healthcare in general, and in all likelihood they would be working longer and contributing longer to the economy. In general, health begets wealth. So the extension of healthy life in and of itself should be considered to be a great value.

KYLE JENSEN: You don't think they would continue to put a strain on government benefits and costs outside of health?

JAY OLSHANSKY: A lot depends on what the baby boom generation decides to do. If the baby boom generation decides to retire early and earlier and earlier and draw benefits from social security, it would indeed put a strain on social security, but I'm not so sure that's going to happen. This generation, I know we tend to be married to our work and leisure. Remember, just because you are not working doesn't mean you are not spending money. The economy has potential to benefit from a baby boom generation that is both working more and leisure time more and healthy more.

KYLE JENSEN: Now you have co-authored an article called, “In Pursuit of the Longevity Dividend”, what are the major hurdles that you see in obtaining the longevity dividend?

JAY OLSHANSKY: I think there is some resistance among people who may not appreciate the importance of the science that’s going on now in the field of aging and how it should be considered in light of the way we approach disease today. The typical approach that’s taken in modern medicine is to attack one disease at a time. When heart disease arises, you attack it. When stroke arises, you attack it. We modify our risk factors to reduce the risk of certain diseases and of course we consider this all to be good and desirable. In the end what happens is, we can extend our period of life as a result of this new technology, but we are not influencing the biological process of aging at all. So there is the potential anyway that as we continue to make progress against one fatal disease at a time, and we may extend the period of frailty and disability in the oldest regions of the lifespan. The best way to attack that is to go after aging itself, the biological process of aging. Even a minor deceleration in the rate of biological aging has the potential to produce enormous economic benefits, and it would influence the risk of all fatal and non-fatal diseases simultaneously. Understanding the difference between going after aging and its benefits and going after one disease at a time and those benefits I think is the main obstacle that we face.

KYLE JENSEN: What’s your outlook in the next five years in terms of longevity science and getting there?

JAY OLSHANSKY: Next five years? It’s an interesting question because I was just at...I’ve heard others ask that not long ago, and they always say we are only 5-10 years away from a major breakthrough that’s going to achieve the equivalent of immortality, so I’m very hesitant to answer the five year question, and I will tell you that when this question was asked to scientists going back 500 years, 800 years, even some of the alchemists a long time ago, “how far are we away from a major breakthrough?”, they would always give the same answer, “we’re 5 to 10 years away.” I don’t think I’ll give you the five year answer, but what I will tell you is that there has been a large number of rapid breakthroughs in the field of aging that have led scientists, many of whom are skeptical if this is even possible – like me, to believe that it’s plausible that we would be able to find a way to slow aging. So whether we come up with something in particular in the next five years, I doubt. Whether we can make significant progress along the way, I’m very optimistic that this can happen, especially if we decide to invest in it.

KYLE JENSEN: The audience of SAGE Crossroads is made up of scientists, policy makers, and curious consumers. If there is one closing statement you would like to make to them that would sell the whole idea of the longevity dividend, what would it be?

JAY OLSHANSKY: Extension of healthy life is something that we have always been pursuing. We decided to save the lives of children by using immunizations. We save the lives of those in their middle ages as best we can by treating specific diseases and disorders. Life extension is a universal good. It’s a universal goal that we’ve always

had. What we are proposing with a deceleration of the rate of aging, is a continuation of this long historical trend toward the extension of life, but in this case, this offers us the best opportunity for both health and economic gain in the 21st century. In fact, I would go so far to suggest that decelerating the rate of biological aging should be the health paradigm of the 21st century.

KYLE JENSEN: Thank you. On behalf of SAGE Crossroads, I'm Kyle Jensen.