



Meeting report

Launching the International Research Centre for Healthy Ageing and Longevity

Suresh I.S. Rattan

Danish Centre for Molecular Gerontology, Department of Molecular Biology, University of Aarhus, DK-8000 Aarhus-C, Denmark (e-mail: rattan@imsb.au.dk)

The inaugural *International Conference on Longevity*, held in Sydney, Australia (March 5–7, 2004), was the result of the vision, planning, hard work and commitment by a financially independent father–son team of John and Noah Weller. This meeting was also the platform for the launch of the *International Centre for Healthy Ageing and Longevity*, with one of its main aims as promoting interaction and communication of science and practice of ageing and longevity among researchers, clinicians, complementary health care professionals, anti-ageing marketers, and the consumers.

Presently, the glut of spam and misinformation in the cyberspace and other media about ageing prevention, intervention and treatment is sufficient to bamboozle and mislead anybody. In the absence of any reliable, accessible and understandable information available from scientists, researchers and practitioners, even a not-so-gullible consumer can end up buying false promises and useless or even harmful products. There is a genuine public need and demand for accurate information about effective means and products available for achieving a healthy and longer life. Therefore, the ‘Weller initiative’ towards organizing annual conferences on healthy ageing and longevity and creating an international centre around it, is a timely, important and welcome step.

The Sydney conference brought together UN- and WHO’s policy makers, demographers, biogerontologists, clinicians, cosmetic-surgeons, and practitioners of naturopathy, complementary medicine and Chinese medicine. Additionally, evening presentations by the geneticist and environmentalist, David Suzuki, and the clown doctor, Patch Adams, emphasized the importance of our responsibility towards the maintenance and survival of the planet earth and the human race in a peaceful and just way. Parallel to the scientific

proceedings, an exhibition of a wide range of cosmetic, nutraceutical and other life style gadgets and gimmicks together with their sessions on meditation, yoga and other popular fads, was sometimes confusing for the serious minded.

As mentioned earlier, the main aim of this meeting was to encourage and enhance communication and interaction between differing viewpoints. This meeting was not the platform for the presentation, discussion and exchange of the new and hot-from-the-bench research data. Rather, it was an opportunity for scientists to present the gist of knowledge that has been gathered over decades in the field of biogerontology and clinical practice. In the plenary sessions, those representing the case for biodemographic and biogerontological research included Bruce Carnes, Richard Faragher, Michael Fossel, Leonid Gavrilov, Len Hayflick, Don Ingram, James Joseph, Mohsen Meydani, Richard Mollard, Jay Olshansky, Thomas Perls, Suresh Rattan, George Roth and Rudolf Tanzi. In the afternoons, several concurrent sessions and workshops were held, and often it was impossible to keep track of all what was going on. Some of the topics covered in these sessions included mitochondria and ageing (Anthony Linnane), genetics of human longevity (Natalia Gavrilova), modulation of longevity (Robin Holliday, Chris Driver and Ken Watson), and geriatric medicine (David Le Couteur, Jillian Kril, Vasi Naganathan, Arthur Everitt). At the same time, the meeting also offered platform to the representatives of complementary medicine, Chinese medicine, psychological- and lifestyle-modulators, including aromatherapy, naturopathy, biological rhythms and molecularly enhanced water therapy – whatever that means!

An interesting and worrying aspect of the meeting was that whereas the serious science-based lectures often had poor attendance and even some

hostility from the audience, lectures and sessions dealing with the not-so-scientific topics drew huge audience. Similar differences in the number of attendees can be seen between the meetings organized by serious scientists and those by, whom we would like to label as, charlatans and quacks. We, as scientists, should not just dismiss this fact as an expression of ignorance and stupidity on the part of the public. We cannot arrogantly explain it away by saying that the attendees of those meetings/lectures are uneducated ignorant simpletons. Biogerontologists must ponder what is it that is missing in genuine scientific presentations which cannot attract and maintain the interest and attention of a wider audience? How are we really going to educate and warn people about spam and

outright misinformation that leads to their financial, emotional and physical exploitation?

Communication of accurate and valid scientific information is essential to provide general public the knowledge and tools for making correct decisions about their well-being and longevity. The 'Weller initiative' promises to provide, at least for the next 10 years, the platform for doing exactly that and also for developing collaborations between the mainstream and the complementary health care systems. The next meeting to be held in Brisbane, Australia (March 18–20, 2005), and the meetings thereafter, will be another chance and challenge for biogerontologists to communicate their scientific knowledge about ageing interventions and therapies effectively and convincingly.