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DOSSIER “LONGEVITY” / *Philosophical considerations*

The normative implications of the longevity transition



Les implications normatives liées à l'augmentation de la longévité

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Summary This paper explores some of the normative implications of changes in the age profile of longevity improvements. The discussion assumes that in many ageing societies there is still a sense of collective ambivalence about the benefits conferred by continuing longevity increases. Different approaches are considered to making a collective reckoning of the benefits conferred by continuing longevity gains when the age profile of these gains is undergoing profound change. The requirement to make such reckonings raises novel normative problems for policy.

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MOTS CLÉS

Augmentation de la
longévité ;
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Politique

Résumé Ce document explore quelques-unes des implications normatives de changements dans le profil d'âge des améliorations de la longévité. On s'aperçoit que dans de nombreuses sociétés vieillissantes il y a toujours un sentiment d'ambivalence collective sur les avantages liés à l'augmentation de la longévité. Différentes approches font un calcul des avantages collectifs conférés par la recherche d'une plus grande longévité alors que le profil d'âge de ces gains est en profonde mutation. Cette nouvelle donne soulève des problèmes normatifs nouveaux pour les politiques.

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A longevity revolution?

There has been a remarkable transition in human longevity since the middle of the last century. Although life expectancy at birth increased throughout the twentieth century in high-income countries, for several decades these gains were driven mainly by reductions in early life mortality. This changed in the second half of the century. The mortality reductions that were powering the continuing improvement in life expectancy at birth shifted to progressively older ages. Not only were more and more people surviving to pensionable age, but they were surviving for longer *in* old age. By the end of the century, it was clear that previous assumptions about an imminent slowdown in longevity gains (as they depended increasingly on improving survival for people in their 80s and 90s) had to be discarded; and for the time being at least, there seems little reason to reverse this judgement. In most low mortality countries, the modal age at death continues to increase [1,2].

This longevity transition has been accompanied in most of the world's richer countries by a fall in fertility rates to levels that are sufficient to put a brake on population growth. When fertility is just below replacement level, the brake is applied quite gently (as in the USA). There are, however, many countries in which the brake on population growth is being applied sharply enough (persistent low fertility) for a realistic planning horizon to include a likely transition from population growth to population decline. The combined effect of the brake on population growth and the longevity transition shows up in a shift in the age structure of populations – from 'youthful' to 'mature' – that is generally taken to represent a permanent reconfiguration of the demographic landscape, and it is often measured by looking at changes in dependency ratios.

Although the practical and policy implications of large-scale age structural change in the population overlap with those that result from continuing longevity gains, they are not identical [3]. The fundamental challenge that results from continuing longevity gains can be conceptualised in terms of changes in patterns of risk and opportunity faced by individuals across the typical life course. Longer lives have implications for the way we manage, and prepare for, various critical transitions – such as the transition from work to retirement, or from health to ill-health and disability – and these define the challenges both for individuals and for society. A great deal of policy effort is aimed not only at delaying these transitions (i.e. recalibrating institutional arrangements, such as the timing of retirement, in line with an extended lifespan), but also at enhancing the various resources that individuals draw on to deal with them. Broadly, speaking, we know what we are trying to do: delay unwelcome transitions where possible (maintain health, activity and productivity for longer); enable individuals to take better advantage of the opportunities that result from increased longevity (poor health and low income are the most obvious barriers to the enjoyment of later life); improve protection against the shocks or losses that also result from increased longevity (which will include the risk of serious disability). How much of this 'prudent planning' falls to individuals and how much is managed by government varies between countries with different kinds of public

welfare arrangements. Ageing societies will almost certainly combine policies that help individuals to protect themselves more effectively against changing patterns of risk with policies that offer improved provision of care or support in the face of shocks that cannot be avoided. It may prove very hard, moreover, to avoid policy decisions that reconfigure the respective responsibilities of individuals and households, on the one hand, and governments, on the other; and this raises issues that are often discussed in terms of fairness.

We can distinguish challenges that are defined in terms of the allocation of resources across the typical life course from challenges that deal with the flow of resources between population groups defined by a position in the typical life course. A shift in the age structure of the population changes the relative size of different age groups, and for societies which make heavy use of general taxation or social insurance as a means of financing age-related benefits, this presents a major policy challenge because of the potential impact on the flow of public resources between groups at different stages of the life course. Age structural change, moreover, constrains and complicates policy responses to the longevity transition. The policy implications of population ageing – as an outcome, which is the combined effect of the longevity transition *and* sub-replacement fertility – have been the focus of an enormous amount of discussion and analysis. That there is, furthermore, an ethical or normative dimension to some of this debate is apparent in the importance attached to arguments about intergenerational justice, and what makes these arguments interesting is their novelty [4]. We are asked to consider different ways of extending or refining or revising our normative ideas about distributive justice in order to guide policy responses to a profound change in the circumstances of social life.

My aim in this paper is to consider whether and how such an extension or refinement of normative ideas might be required of us specifically as a result of the longevity transition, that is to say, apart from any issues that are generated by the wider phenomenon of population ageing. One evident consequence of the longevity transition is the continually increasing modal age at death, and uncertainty about the implications of this phenomenon for the quality of the transition from life to death has fuelled debate on the normative constraints that govern this transition [5–7]. We have seen a shift in public opinion on these matters, in favour of a strengthening of the constraint against age-based rationing in healthcare [8], and a weakening of the constraint against assisted suicide. My concern here, however, is with neither of these issues (on which there is already a very large literature), but with another aspect of our normative thinking about the longevity transition. What I have in mind is uncertainty about whether or not we are better off, as a society, with continuing longevity gains, and I want to suggest that this is a question, which does indeed require us to refine or extend our normative ideas. Most of the paper will be given over to examining the policy relevance of this judgement and the normative considerations that bear on it. As with arguments about intergenerational justice, what is interesting about this question is its novelty and its complex ramifications.

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