

Cardiovascular disease in elderly people: A neglected and growing threat

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) already is the leading cause of death worldwide among the over-65 year-olds, claiming some 12 million lives a year. The number will undoubtedly grow, as will the total of those suffering from CVD conditions, because the world population of elderly people is projected to double within the next 20 years. But prevention and treatment of these illnesses – including heart disease, stroke and arterial disease – among elderly people remains a low priority almost everywhere, the experts say.

The majority of the world's cases of CVD now occur in developing countries, and as 80 per cent of all deaths occur in the developing world, cardiovascular diseases will continue to be the most important health problem well into the next century.

However, few epidemiological studies have specifically examined the elderly, and little is known about the risk factors for CVD – such as high blood pressure, elevated blood cholesterol levels, smoking, obesity, physical inactivity and diabetes – in this age group, or about the prospects for preventing them. People over 65 make up 12 per cent of the population of North America. Substantial increases in their numbers are projected for the next

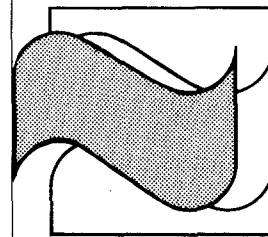
15 years, and their growth will be about ten times faster between 2005 and 2025 as the population of the “baby boom” – those born from 1946 to 1964 – grow old.

Europe above all other regions has the highest proportion of population aged over 65, at 14 per cent in 1990. By 2025, more than one in ten Europeans are likely to be at least 75 years old.

The number of people over 65 in Africa is expected to rise from 19.3 million in 1990 to 65.5 million by the year 2025. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the elderly will make up about 17 per cent of the population by the year 2020, compared to between two and seven per cent now. In China alone, where at present one million elderly people a year die from stroke, the elderly population is projected to increase by 220 per cent from its 1990 level by 2025. The increase in Malaysia could be 321 per cent, and in Indonesia 414 per cent, over the same period.

*World Health Organization,
Geneva*

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**IGW Theaterstraße 2 · D-97070 Würzburg
Tel. 0049-931-354450/Fax 35445-44**

Kontaktadressen für die Schweiz:

Dr. Su Steiner, Weggengasse 3, 8001 Zürich
Telefon 01-221 03 13

Peter Schulthess, Waldschulweg 5, 8032 Zürich
Telefon 01-381 98 30