

## EDITORIAL

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Ernest W. Johnson, MD

# Old Age Is Not a Disease



Physicians, among other “health providers,” tend to assign musculoskeletal pain (symptoms) to “degenerative arthritis.” This is reinforced to the elderly patient by demonstrating an x-ray with joint narrowing and spurring.

Some of us now talk about the “frail elderly”—another pigeonhole with which to label people. Look at the tennis tournaments with 70-, 80-, and 90-year-old categories.

My plan is to reverse these pathologic labels and explain them as wear and tear rather than as “degenerative.” “Degenerative” is an overused tag that is both ominous and laden with bad thoughts of progression and worse!

There are beaucoup studies showing that exercise is good for all ages, especially the late decades.

In the recent past, *JAMA* contained a special communication by two physicians (one from the National Institute on Aging) presenting the effect on health care costs of the aging of America; that is, Medicare costs for the oldest old (age 85 and

above) will increase sixfold. They made a good case for increasing the research in those conditions causing the greatest disability and loss of independence (e.g., Alzheimer’s); however, they emphasized the less-known fact that a plurality of individuals between 75 to 84 live independently. And this occurs even without the minimal resources applied to the rehabilitation effort for our older population. They also proclaimed that 99% of Americans below age 75 are not in a nursing home.

So why do we give so many discouraging messages to and about our elders? Please desist!

Better advice is “Use it or lose it.” Even more appropriately, “move it” à la Newton’s admonition, “A body in motion tends to stay in motion”—and the reverse, a body at rest often stays there.

Physicians reach for the prescription pad when a 75-year-old has pain in the knee. Rather, they should recommend a stationary bicycle or an every-other-day swimming program beginning and ending with a hot whirlpool.

My explanation to a “senior” who enters the office with complaints of discomfort will be “gray hair of the back, or knee, or shoulder, or neck” and my advice is—*get on with life!*