

Keynote “From the silver surfer to the silver tsunami – how can we learn and live with an aging population”

By John Rowe

In today's society, the demographic curve is trending right. In the last century, we doubled life expectancy. Since 1990 we increased life expectancy by 8 years. In essence this means that every 3 months we added 1 month to life expectancy.

According to Dr. Rowe, we are moving from a pyramidal age structure to a rectangular structure. The number of people greater than 65 years old is greater than those less than 45 years old. To be successful, society needs to re-engineer core institutions (education, healthcare, work, retirement, transportation, housing). Today, core institutions are simply not designed to support a rectangular population age structure. If we don't re-engineer these institutions, we will not have an environment where people can age successfully.

What would failure look like if we don't change core institutions? Failure would show an increased equity gap, a failure to provide needs and services, and failure to benefit the contributions that an increasingly large and healthy population could offer society. For these reasons, we can't afford to fail.

A few myths also need to be debunked regarding aging populations.

- Myth 1 – to be old is to be sick. “Sick old people are sick because they are sick and not because they are old.” The average 65-year-old has 19 more years of life expectancy, 15 of which will be without disability.
- Myth 2 – If an older person is in the work force, that is taking a job away from a younger person. 50 years ago, this was the “lump of labor” hypothesis stating that there was a fixed amount of available work, though this is a fallacy. Strong economies lift employment in both youth and late life.
- Myth 3 – Inter-generational warfare. The tension between middle age and old people. There is a fair amount of evidence against this. Survey after survey show that middle aged people support social security in the United States. This is primarily due to two reasons 1) social security is an economic support program for middle aged people for later in life; 2) middle aged people have been paying into it and are rightful future beneficiaries.

Where do we go from here? One characteristic of a successfully aging society is productivity. To do this we'll need to engage older populations either via work for pay or on voluntary basis. Working is beneficial both mentally and physically for the elderly. Volunteering is as beneficial as smoking cessation. It showed both mental health improvement as well as cognitive functional improvement. Physicians should consider this as a vital sign. Current programs on volunteering only reach 1% of their potential audience though and need to be supplemented.

The second approach would be increasing cohesion across generations and ethnicities and ensure support from middle aged generations for the elderly regardless of ethnicity and as a sign of societal solidarity.