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## Introduction

### *Wellbeing in Later Life*

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As long ago as 1968, Bobby Kennedy, who was running for the Democratic Party nomination for the Presidency of the United States, gave a speech at the University of Kansas on the limitations of gross national product, emphasizing the greater value of quality of life, which has since been configured to reflect our gross national wellbeing:

Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product, now, is over \$800 billion dollars a year, but that gross national product—if we judge the United States of America by that—that gross national product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armoured cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities.... Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our

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learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

University of Kansas, March 18, 1968,  
<http://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/portraits/robert-f-kennedy>



This series of volumes on wellbeing takes the life-course approach, starting with families and children, through adult life, work, and old age; see the Foresight report on *Mental capital though life* (Kirkwood, Bond, May, McKeith, & Teh, 2008), which we have included as an Appendix to this volume. The series as a whole explores the many facets of wellbeing and the interventions and policies that might help to enhance the quality of our lives. The present volume looks in particular at wellbeing in later life, exploring the issues of what inhibits and promotes wellbeing among older people. It was during the 1990s that concerns began to be expressed about the potential “demographic time bomb” of a fast-growing global aging population. In the U.K. government’s Foresight programme on *Mental capital and wellbeing* (Cooper, Field, Goswami, Jenkins, & Sahakian, 2009) it was estimated that by 2070 the number of people aged 65 years or more in the UK would double to over 21 million, and those aged 80 or over would treble to 9.5 million. They also predicted that within 25 years, and this seems to be coming true, that the number of people with dementia, as a consequence of an aging population, will double to 1.4 million, with the costs to the U.K. economy of dealing with people with this condition trebling from £17 billion to over £50 billion per annum.

This volume was inspired by collaboration of the editors on the Foresight project and by the growing appreciation of the importance of looking positively at the lengthening of human life expectancy. Too often the extraordinary success of humanity in doubling the average length of human life—as has occurred already in the developed world and is fast occurring globally—is seen as a “problem.” This highly blinkered perception needs to be challenged by looking at the opportunities and potential for wellbeing, in all its aspects, to be preserved across the great majority of the life course. Of course, wellbeing cannot be the blessing of all: ill health and misfortune can strike any of us, and for too many later life is experienced as a time far removed from any rational concept of wellbeing. Nevertheless, much of the impairment of wellbeing in later life is preventable, at least to some degree. The aim of this volume is therefore to look as openly as possible at the issue of wellbeing in later life from an essentially positive standpoint. The disciplinary range of the volume is wide and the authors have been selected





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for their capacity to bring different perspectives. Several of the authors work at Newcastle University in the north of England, which is possibly the first academic institution to recognize the societal challenge of aging as being an issue that commands the attention of researchers of all backgrounds (see <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/changingage>). Others come from industry and from centers that have also made world-leading contributions to the agenda of making the most of our longer lives. There is arguably nothing destined to transform human society more during the twenty-first century and beyond than the challenges and opportunities of a world in which we are all living longer.

We start the volume with a chapter by Roland Rau and James Vaupel of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, highlighting the dramatic and continuing increase in life expectancy in the world. This is followed by an examination of the biological determinants and malleability of aging by Thomas Kirkwood; the message here is that great opportunity exists to improve the quality of our health in later life. In Chapter 4 Carol Jagger and Katie Brittain introduce the challenges of measuring wellbeing, especially as it may be experienced by the very old. They look at the issues prevalent in those aged 85 and older, such as the impact of deteriorating physical and mental health, transition to sheltered housing or care home, and death of spouse, friends, and perhaps family. They explore these issues in the context of a number of broad domains—health, physical environment, social environment, and personal autonomy—drawing on a variety of major global population studies in the field and concluding on the future issues of concern. In Chapter 5 Kate Bennett and Laura Soulsby bring the perspective from psychology to bear again on the definition of wellbeing looked at from both the intrapersonal angle and the social context. From this develops an important analysis of the concept of resilience, within the “ecological” context in which our lives are lived.

From psychology the book progresses to physiology, with Chapter 6 by Alexandra Munro and John Mathers highlighting the critical role of nutrition in the health and wellbeing of older people. They show how nutrition can affect individuals at all stages of the life course, emphasizing how nutrition can moderate the aging process in a positive way by preventing various processes that cause macromolecular damage (which causes aging) and how it can support the body’s natural defense mechanisms such as DNA repair. The physiological theme is then extended in Chapter 7 by Grainne Gorman, Josh Wood, and Michael Trenell who demonstrate the extensive and fast-growing evidence that physical activity and exercise exert powerful







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positive influences on a wide spectrum of health measures and wellbeing in later life.

A key threat to wellbeing in later life is perceived by many to be the loss of independence. In Chapter 8 John Bond examines the complex of interacting biopsychosocial factors that together influence perceptions and the experience of capability/disability and independency/dependency among older people. The author uses data from various European countries to explore how policies on these two constructs have developed, and how, given the science, policies can be facilitated to enhance capability and independency among the elderly. Another way to enable older people to combat social isolation is through technology. It is interesting that many countries provide their young with computers and train them to be IT and social-media literate, but do little with their older citizens. Peter Gore in Chapter 9 explores the potential of technology for reducing social isolation among older people, but also highlights the potential downsides. He notes: “It seems fair to observe that the rapid development of technology means we can potentially remain more mobile, more active, and much more in touch with our personal support networks, and even readily extend them. Technology is, however, only an enabler....” He also emphasizes the importance of social connectedness, which can be facilitated by technology but also importantly by enabling physical access to more face-to-face social situations.



Technologies involve the consumer industries, which also have a much wider role to play in contributing to wellbeing in later life. Michael Catt and Frans van der Ouderaa draw on their extensive experience and pioneering efforts in this sphere in Chapter 10 to explore how the consumer industries can deliver everyday products ranging from self-care, hygiene, nutrition, and financial services to communications and utilities, which are important elements contributing to maintained independent living. Successful consumer products, they conclude, reflect human needs and desires, which need to be appropriately assessed in order that products and services can be targeted accurately.

In today’s society the domains of work and learning are strongly focused on the young. In similar vein, in Chapter 11 Jim Soulsby convincingly demonstrates how involvement in education and learning can enhance wellbeing across the entire age range. Although most older people remain cognitively active, scientific research on the benefits for wellbeing of continuing to learn has been slow to develop. Soulsby highlights the potential of such research, but also examines the changing economic landscape and the



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impact of scarcer public resources. One of his conclusions is that “education and learning are usually seen as activities to be engaged in retirement as opposed to processes to assist in the decision-making processes required in determining levels and areas of postretirement engagement.”

Although many of the earlier chapters have explored how we can enhance wellbeing in later life, the issue of quality of life and declining cognitive abilities is fundamental to wellbeing. In Chapter 12 Louise Robinson and Lynne Corner examine the place of dementia as one of the biggest risk factors to health and wellbeing among older people. Whereas the number of those suffering and predicted to suffer over the next couple of decades is high and growing, the cost to the individuals and their families is incalculable. They highlight dementia, from the U.K. Department of Health definition, as “a progressive decline in multiple areas of function, including memory, reasoning, communications skills, and the skills needed to carry out daily activities.” They explore what factors promote and inhibit wellbeing in people with dementia, diagnosis of cognitive impairment and early intervention, caring for the carers, care in care homes, and end-of-life care for those suffering from dementia.

Chapter 13 from Rudi Westendorp, Bert Mulder, Willem van der Does, and Frans van der Ouderaa emphasizes new strategies for health in later life. They present a conceptual framework that focuses on the role of vitality in contributing to longevity, defining vitality as “the ability of a person to set ambitions which are appropriate for one’s life satisfaction and to realize these goals despite functional limitations.” They explore the research that shows that vitality is an important factor in wellbeing among older people, and how, in practice, this can be achieved.

However much (or little) wellbeing has been realized through succeeding phases of life, each life eventually comes to an end. Chapter 14 from Julian Hughes explores the philosophical issues of maintaining wellbeing through the end of life. Hughes addresses questions like what constitutes a “good life,” highlighting three philosophical theories that underpin wellbeing. He uses Aristotelian logic to suggest that “the good life is characterized by the virtues,” and not just on one occasion but throughout life, even at its end. “But we must add ‘in a complete life’,” Aristotle reflected, “For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.”

Finally, we complete the book with a trio of chapters that offer a distinctive perspective on wellbeing in later life from specific populations, two defined by geography in the contemporary world and one derived from looking







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to the past. In Chapter 15 Ngaire Kerse, Mere Kēpa, Ruth Teh, and Lorna Dyll address crosscultural issues of aging and wellbeing, drawing in particular on the Life and Living in Advanced Age Cohort Study in New Zealand (LiLACS NZ). The special circumstances of population diversity in New Zealand provide a rich basis for comparison of the Māori and European peoples, from which important lessons can be derived about crosscultural issues in other parts of the world as well. In Chapter 16 Yasuyuki Gondo, Yasumichi Arai, and Nobuyoshi Hirose analyze the wellbeing of the oldest old, including centenarians, in present day Japan. The significance of the Japanese experience is profound since for many years Japan has had the highest life expectancy in the world, having also undergone a dramatically rapid increase in life expectancy during the latter half of the twentieth century. The chapter introduces and discusses theories of psychological wellbeing with a special focus on the concept of “gerotranscendence” as a model for the adaptations that individuals may make at very old ages. Lastly, Chapter 17 by Helen Yallop explores how wellbeing in later life was considered in eighteenth-century England. She reveals many remarkable parallels between attitudes to wellbeing and aging then and now, exposing issues that remain fully fresh today. Indeed there are lessons to be relearned from this valuable historical perspective that we will do well to remember as we grapple with the issues of wellbeing in later life in the twenty-first century.



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