Aging America: Notes

In pre-industrial societies the social standing of individuals increased with age. Older members of society were viewed as sources of knowledge and as enforcers of social customs. In industrial societies, middle aged people hold the greatest social power because of employment and work related skills.

Employment opportunities decline with age. The closer people get to retirement age, the more difficult it is for them to find re-employment in the event of job loss. Job re-training programs are seldom geared to older workers.

Ageism: the belief that one age category is by nature superior to another age category. It is most often directed towards elderly people in industrial societies.

In American society, media reinforces ageism. Elderly people are rarely used to sell household products, cosmetics, clothing , or automobiles. Instead they are used to sell prescription and over the counter medicines, insurance, and burial plans. News coverage of the aging seems to focus on negatives such as poor health, poverty, and loneliness.

You are officially elderly in the United States when you reach 65, however due to an increase of life expectancy this specified age is being debated in Congress for purposes of Medicare and Social Security.

Currently there are approximately 606 million elderly in the world, but by 2050 that number is expected to increase to 2 billion. Europe is the oldest (estimated 40% of population by 2050). Africa is the youngest continent. Immigration into the US keeps aging in the moderate zone. By 2050 in the United States, 1 in every 5 American is expected to be elderly. This is called the Graying of America.

2 Primary causes of the Graying of America: Baby Boomers (Americans born between 1946-1969), Decline of birthrate after 1969. Current life expectancy for American Men is 74.1, 80.6 for American Women. 78.3 for White Americans and 70.4 for Black Americans.

Lobbying Power: AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) has over 34 million members.

Availability of Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid are concerns for elderly persons. In 1960, there were 5 workers paying into Social Security for every elderly person. By 2030, when all the Baby Boomers reach retirement age this ratio is expected to be 2 to 1. Social Security benefits have needed to be expanded the increased life expectancies of many Americans today. Therefore not only are more people receiving Social Security, Medicare/Medicaid, but also the length of time they receive benefits has increased. Permanent solutions to these problems have not been implemented.

Gerontologist: Sociologists that study the processes and phenomena of Aging. Gerontologists assist in setting policies for senior citizens and for meeting the needs of an aging population.

Geriatrics: Branch of medicine that deals with the diseases and health issues of the elderly. Both Gerontology and Geriatrics are expanding fields with the growing retirement of the Baby Boom generation.

Today the poverty rate for the elderly is 10%. However, more than 22% of elderly African Americans and 19% of elderly Hispanics live in poverty. African American and Hispanic women are more likely to live in poverty than African American and Hispanic Men.

Poverty level for a single person 85 or older is $8,250. For elderly couples, the poverty level is $10,400. Many other elderly persons are living in conditions of near-poverty.