

## **The Denial of Aging: Perpetual Youth, Eternal Life, and Other Dangerous Fantasies**

A book review by Violet Kalynchuk-Lavoie

Author: Muriel R. Gillick, M.D.

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This book is definitely written for the American reader – the American health care system is reviewed through examples based on elderly Americans from Dr. Gillick’s perspective. Throughout her book she does criticize the health care system especially the wastefulness of medicine and tests on the geriatric population. She believes that in most cases the results do not change or have little impact on the outcome. Due to the wastefulness that occurs, Dr. Gillick believes that the system needs to be overhauled.

Dr. Gillick does touch on some important points – that people need to be more responsible for their health and that prevention is key to aging well. She believes that screening and physical exams in old age are hopeless and counterproductive. Health maintenance views should be replaced by prevention strategies tailored to the realities of aging according to Dr. Gillick’s opinion. The author is a strong advocate for “intermediate care” rather than curative or comfort care for the elderly. Intermediate care is defined as the middle ground between aggressive and exclusively comfort-oriented care.

Dr. Gillick differentiates between “futility care” versus “palliative care” in the elderly - she argues that if people had to pay for tests they would not be so eager to have them done and she believes this to be a waste of valuable resources. In her opinion the long term care system lacks in comprehensiveness, coordination and maintains that nursing homes need to undergo fundamental changes in philosophy, regulation, staffing and finances. The assisted living model of promoting independence, dignity, and emphasis on choice is the better alternative and should not be converged with nursing homes. She believes that assisted living should be structured, monitored, assessed and paid for in the same manner as nursing homes.

Another concept brought forward in this book is that modern medicine can and does extend life, but at what cost? We have the ability to correct physical ailments, but do these medical interventions sometimes prolong agony as in the case of dementia patients? In these cases, families must suffer the pain of watching their loved ones die a slow and undignified death. Dr. Gillick believes that life extension (anti-aging potion) would create a “slew of social problems” such as overpopulation.

The solution to the delimita of aging from the author’s perspective is to consider old age as a time of meaning and spirituality not as a time of sadness and loss. In her book, Dr. Gillick strives to portray the varieties of old age with its challenges and possibilities. She says: “We cannot overcome the inherent nature of old age but we can transcend its infirmities through our attitudes, behaviour and institutions.”