

Positive ageing encourages South Africans to live better

By [Dr Ryan Fuller](#)

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The busy pace of today's lifestyles means that many of us overlook the power we have to choose to enjoy our world more by living better and longer.



(Image: Sharrin Chibba)

Growing older is no longer something we must simply accept and endure - and the Second World Conference on Healthy Ageing, to be held in Johannesburg end of this month, examines major ways in which we as individuals can control our own ageing processes as much as possible.

It looks at what we call positive ageing, making the most of growing older with active minds in active bodies, free from pain. It also looks at challenges to watch for, such as overmedication, caregiving and legal issues.

It is an honour to host a conference of this calibre in South Africa as it once again reaffirms that we are moving in the right direction in creating a culture of much needed conversations. The African continent now faces an explosion of what we call non-communicable diseases - cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers and chronic respiratory conditions and we have to find the best practice and holistic solutions to deal with them.

Already two out of five South Africans die from non-communicable diseases, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The 40% is not far below the 51% who die of communicable diseases, from diarrhoea and pneumonia to HIV and

TB, as well as maternal health and nutrition issues. This situation is changing fast and it's expected that by 2030, non-communicable diseases will cause five times more deaths than communicable diseases in developed and developing countries.

There may be elements of non-communicable diseases that we inherit through our genes - but we can do a remarkable amount to put more life in our years. I've been excited to see so much inspiration emerging in recent years to do just that, from the Park Runs that have spread across the country, through to initiatives such as cycling lanes spearheaded by the eThekweni Metro mayor, to the good-natured rivalry in the Fittest Cities competition.

All of these initiatives and more underline what we can do in our own lives and communities to improve our quality of life. It's up to each of us to find whatever works for us as individuals, families and groups of friends and acquaintances. Exercise, eating and drinking alcohol in moderation, cutting down on salt intake, enjoying cleaner air and great relationships can do us good and more importantly - the power to slow down the ageing process.

The alternative is what's studied under the specialised focus of the burden of disease for individuals, our communities and the economy. The WHO calculates the number of people who die prematurely, before the age of 60, thereafter a calculation of years of life lost is done. This study provides us with great insight as to whether global health is improving or not and further clarifies what still needs to be done.

Another WHO metric system, Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY), essentially calculates and measures the limitations put on our lives based on factors from injuries and smoking to hypertension and obesity.

Our congress will be a great platform to learn more about healthy ageing, meet experts and share in the inspiration. It will offer the latest understandings of the ageing process, as well as some really creative solutions. "Bingo as a diabetes management tool", for instance, is the intriguing title of a presentation by Dr Yanira Cruz, president and CEO of the USA's National Hispanic Council on Ageing.

When we were children, we had to find strategies to cope in an adult world. When we became adults, we realised there was no magic wand to wave that would make everything turn out the way we hoped - we needed to put together a combination of personal insights with the best efforts we could deliver.

Dealing with ageing is no different. My personal prescription for good ageing is about putting your house in order so you can, indeed, put as much good life in your years as possible. Many people find that carrying the burden of their own unresolved personal history when they confront the ageing process makes matters harder. So you also need to work on your interpersonal relationships, look into your inner self and consider how you can enjoy the best relationships with the world around you.

To complete this circle, a feature on the importance of spirituality and its impact on positive ageing in one of the conference's consumer workshops, which are open to the general public and give you access to some top experts from South Africa and around the world.

We're pleased that the importance of positive ageing particularly and public health in general is being taken much more seriously now by both corporates, such as food producers, and by national and local government, who are backing healthy city initiatives such as pedestrian precincts and children's playgrounds to help us all incorporate some more movement in our days - however you choose to do that.

As we go through life, our exercise preferences change, which is great for retaining our interest. Exercise experts currently recommend 150 minutes a week of moderate exercise, spread over five days, or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise across three days - even if you do your exercise in 10-minute bursts.

Exercise is vitally important because it can counter conditions associated with ageing, such as hypertension. Already hypertension affects at least 42% of all South African adults, 34% have high cholesterol and more than 10% have high

blood glucose. These factors put people at risk of cardiovascular problems, stroke and diabetes - and are aggravated by lack of exercise and obesity. More than 72% of South African women aged over 35 are overweight or obese and more than 50% of the male counterparts aged 45 to 65 years are overweight.

These are serious issues to be discussed. If we want age to be nothing but a number, we need to keep reminding ourselves to track our own numbers, from weight and minutes of exercise to blood pressure, blood glucose and cholesterol. Small changes in the way we live and eat can have a big impact over the years - and that's what will give you the payback of life in your years.

Dr Ryan Fuller MBBCh, MRCPsych, CST, Psychiatry is the Chair of the Scientific Committee for the 2nd World Conference on Healthy Ageing to be held in Johannesburg 30 July - 02 August 2015.

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