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## The Longevity Game

# science

**Y**ou may be pleased to learn that you cannot die of old age in Wisconsin. It's the law.

But, this doesn't mean the state's residents will live forever. It's simply that "old age" cannot be used as the causal factor on a death certificate, explains Dr. Edmund Duthie, professor of medicine and chief of geriatrics/gerontology at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone die of old age in my practice," he admits. "Most people develop a condition and die of that."

That's why today, in Wisconsin and across the country, most research is aimed at understanding, treating and preventing disease — not on preventing or slowing aging. "We're trying to understand aging and seeing what can be done to prolong life, but it doesn't do much good if you have cancer," Duthie points out.

Alzheimer's, arthritis, diabetes, cancer, heart disease and stroke are just a few of the diseases that can create frailty and suffering later in life. Already substantial progress has been made in preventing or treating these, Duthie notes. The relationship of disease and aging can be a tangled web. Some symptoms of disease may look like aging, Duthie explains. For instance, diabetes can cause hardening of the arteries, which may also be associated with aging. "Some say the disease accelerates aging," he says. Whether diabetes hastens aging or simply has similar symptoms, it certainly shortens life, Duthie explains.

In addition to disease, diet, exercise, the environment and our own genetics all influence how we age, and to some extent how susceptible we are to disease. "There's probably a longevity gene," Duthie says. But even that is not a straightforward issue. Is it a matter of being genetically programmed for longevity or rather programmed not to get a disease that shortens our lives? Maybe it is a little of both. Researchers continue to probe the ways in which genetics influence disease and longevity.

For the last 100 years, we've made steady progress toward improving the quality and longevity of life. "There's very solid data to suggest with each generation people are coping better with aging," he says.

But, will we reach the point where people in Wisconsin will actually die of old age? "We're getting more people closer to the max," Duthie says. "I'm very optimistic."



John Washburn shows off his lifeline.

**"As we currently understand it, aging is universal, progressive and irreversible. Almost by definition, it is inevitable. It's a natural process, and there's nothing we can do about it."**

*Dr. Duthie*

- Story by Patrice L. Peltier