

Is it how long we live, or how well?

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COMMENT

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Dad died in January 30 years ago, just a few days after he turned 67. I'll be 67 myself in January, but I'm not particularly worried. A new Alaska Life Table issued this month by state demographers tells me that as of today I can expect to live until July 14, 2023, on which date I will be 82.5 years of age, and dead.

Analyzing this kind of statistical destiny is a part of my job as an economist. But the dry data of life, death and survival cast a different light when they shine closer to home. Because women live longer than men, and because my wife is younger than I, the tables say there is less than a 20 percent chance she will die before I do. The probabilities are that Judy will spend the last years of her life as a widow. As of today she can expect to live nine years and six months after I die. I say "today," because her "expected years without Gregg" isn't fixed. The longer she lives, the longer her expected widowhood stretches before her. Assuming she buries me on July 14, 2023 (which happens to be the French national holiday, justifying fireworks), she can expect a further 14 years of life.

Although the life expectancy of a 67-year-old Alaska male is longer now than in 1977, when Dad died, even then his death was earlier than average. But if the dice rolled against him in longevity, the manner of his dying was swift and, as far as I was able to tell, without major agony. That might not be the case for me were I to be stricken today with the ischemic stroke that killed Dad, in which the blood supply to his brain was blocked by a clot.

New diagnostic tools -- CAT scans, MRIs, Doppler ultrasound and arteriography -- have remarkably improved stroke diagnosis. These, together with clot-buster drugs and new surgical techniques for clearing arteries, mean stroke victims are far more likely to survive than they were in Dad's day.

But what kind of life would be in store for me if I survived the stroke that killed my father? The statistics are not comforting. Fully 75 percent of stroke survivors either never work again or are forced to make major changes in the kind of work they do. Common difficulties include paralysis, incontinence and impairment of speech. Stroke survivors frequently encounter emotional problems such as depression, mania and dementia.

Just thinking about such a prognosis gets me depressed. From an economic perspective it raises provocative questions. Are we investing too much in prolonging the duration of life, with too little attention to the quality of the months or years of living thus gained? A growing body of economic and public health research suggests we are.

Unfortunately, how we should go about righting that balance is not always clear. A study commissioned by marketers of cigarettes in Czechoslovakia showed that increased tobacco usage was associated with reduced overall costs of the nation's health care and universal retirement plans. The tobacco interests withdrew the study when it was shown that it had these desirable effects by increasing deaths among the otherwise healthy young and middle-aged segments of the population. Whatever the numbers may say, common sense tells me we should continue to discourage smoking.

That said, there are strong economic arguments for reconsidering our prevailing cultural attitude toward suicide. Mom, who lived to be 94, was a charter member of the Hemlock Society. The group, founded in 1980 and now operating under the name Compassionate Choices, advocates for legislation making it easier for those seeking their own death to find the means.

Mom died of natural causes, but as I contemplate my own death I can't help but be influenced by the vast public and private resources being sucked up keeping people alive long past their ability to enjoy life. I can't say how I will respond if confronted with that choice, but I can say for sure that when I'm gone I'd rather there be a positive number than a deficit at the bottom of my economic life-ledger. Making a graceful and timely exit might be the best -- maybe the only -- way to achieve that.

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