

## Aging wisely

Newton Luiz Terra

Director of the Geriatrics and Gerontology Institute at PUCRS

Aging is one of the most difficult tasks in life. Many people never face the great aging crisis, since during some time they struggle against the inevitable fact and, little by little, they achieve a state of bitter resignation. Afterwards, they renounce to every ambition, get tired and lose vitality. One of the most beautiful opportunities of growth and human evolution is lost due to not understanding that the aging process offers people a great opportunity to grow. It is during the old age that one has the chance to grow.

Marcus Tullius Cicero was at the age of 62 when he wrote *De Senectude*, his famous essay on aging. “No one is so old as to think that he cannot live one more year”. The quote uttered by the Roman politician, jurist and thinker has been proved to be time resistant. When reading such a classic, it is impressing how issues usually discussed by geriatricians and gerontologists more than 2,000 years after this manuscript are dealt with. Likewise, the absolutely up-to-date solutions proposed to such issues are also remarkable. Aging shall not necessarily mean decline or loss of functions. The age does not determine behavior and experiences during the old age, but a range of factors which influence the aging process.

The old age does not necessarily need to follow a decadent course. The findings and transformations occurred during our century, especially in the area of preventive, predictive and curative geriatrics, sanitary and urban engineering, in addition to technological and educational advances, have provided the opportunity of a longer and healthier life worldwide. Currently, men and women are living longer and longer. By 2050, nothing less than 64 million Brazilians – the equivalent to 30% of the population – will be 60 or older. Today, they are 26 million, a little more than 13%. Life expectancy shall have changed from the current 76 years to 81 years old by 2050, above the world average, expected to be at 76 years. Although the old age in Brazil chronologically begins at the age of 60 years, individuals who exceed such age physically, emotionally and intellectually capable are more and more numerous. In Brazil there are examples of octogenarians and nonagenarians who actively and brilliantly perform their activities.

One of the most interesting findings of gerontology is that in fact each individual is at different ages at the same time:

- *Biological* – corresponds to the individual’s physical age, that is the condition or state of the body, which is necessarily not related to the chronological age.

- *Social* – determined by the social rules and expectations, which categorize people according to their rights as citizens, assigning them tasks to be executed more or less according to their chronological and biological ages.
- *Cultural* – refers to the culture phenomenon the individual is inserted in.
- *Philosophical* – refers to the conceptions, life values.
- *Psychological* – defines who and how an individual feels during this life period.
- *Economical* – economic capability of the elderly to act in the social means in which they live, in a specific moment of their lives.
- *Chronological* – is the birth age, determined by the number of years lived by the individual. It is a limited index of the individual's age.

It is really important for those who start aging to avoid a narrow and fatalist view, making them feel and act according to their chronological age, determined by the calendar. One must not forget that the old age is a political institution and a social convention, structured by a system that revokes the individual's rights of social commitments after a determined number of years. Such institution is strongly related to the false powerful machine of popular wisdom, justifying the exile of its members, labeling them as sick, incompetent, unproductive and as a burden to society, asexual, fragile and with no more contributions to make. That is a big lie. The elderly should face this life stage more naturally. Aging with autonomy, independence, healthy, participative, safe and productive is more and more usual and easier to be achieved. Individuals should not forget that energy, ability to work and relationship with other people and enthusiasm persist during the existence of most people.