

TO AGE OR NOT TO AGE?

Australians are living longer than ever before. At the end of the 20th century, 20% of our people were aged 65 years or more and 1% were aged 85 years or more; at the beginning of the century these figures were 4% and 0.01%, respectively. With death rates continuing to fall, life expectancy will inevitably increase. Indeed, the world record, currently 122 years and five months, is predicted to reach 150 years.

In tandem with our increased longevity, our social fabric has changed. Science and secularism have usurped spirituality and religion. In their place, we now have the worship of the body beautiful. In his essay *The medicalisation of old age*, UK academic Shab Ebrahim suggests that our new mantra is "Keep young and beautiful if you want to be loved", pointing out that "We have botulinum toxin for wrinkles, minoxidil for male baldness, whitening treatments [for yellow teeth] and hormonal therapy for menopause."

The anti-ageing movement is gathering pace and demanding scientific solutions. Already, we have the specialty of anti-ageing medicine and, with its growth, geriatrics is said to be in trouble.

There is a growing expectation that science will "cure" ageing. Claims that stem cells and cloning will prove to be the antidote presage a time when recurrently re-created individuals will be tagged with the acronyms BC (before cloning) and AD1 (after duplication 1), AD2, and so on.

What are we to make of all this?

For the moment, ageing is inevitable and the worship of the body beautiful is at odds with reality. We should see ageing as synonymous with continuing quality of living rather than the mere accumulation of years.

Martin B Van Der Weyden

LETTERS

- Vitamin D deficiency is common in frail institutionalised older people in northern Sydney**
Philip N Sambrook, Ian D Cameron, Robert G Cumming, Stephen R Lord, Jennifer M Schwarz, Angelika Trube, Lynette M March 560
- Perhexiline toxicity related to citalopram use**
Karin Nyfort-Hansen 560
- Cholestasis associated with the use of pravastatin sodium**
Robert G Batey, Michelle Harvey 561
- Paracetamol recall: a natural experiment influencing analgesic poisoning**
David Gunnell 561
Anthea Steans 562
Corrine R Balit, Geoffrey K Isbister, Andrew H Dawson, Ian M Whyte 562
- Treatment failure due to methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) with reduced susceptibility to vancomycin**
Anthony J Grabs, Reginald S A Lord 563
- Haemochromatosis: Red Cross Blood Service policy**
Margaret L Buring 564
- An ecological perspective of cholesterol**
Christopher H Cantor 564

BOOK REVIEWS

- A doctor in the garden: Australian flora and the world of medicine**
reviewed by Brian Reid 529
- Emergency medicine. Diagnosis and management. 2nd edition**
reviewed by Garry J Wilkes 529

OBITUARY

- John St George**
by Lourdes I St George 558

SNAPSHOT

- No room in the womb**
Lourdes St George, John St George 558

IN THIS ISSUE . . . 512

IN OTHER JOURNALS . . . 559

COVER: Fire ant queen surrounded by workers, brood and eggs.
Photo produced by USDA-ARS,
courtesy of Roberto Pereira and Karen Vail.