

RECIPE FOR LONGEVITY

"It often has been said that it is not work but worry that kills." This statement, from an early 20th-century *JAMA* editorial entitled *Physicians and longevity*, argued that hard work and a resolute focus on unravelling the unknown in medicine were rewarded with living to an advanced age. Paragons of this phenomenon included Virchow, the famed pathologist (nearly 81 years), Harvey, discoverer of the circulation (79 years), and the French surgeon Ambroise Paré, who, "in spite of a life of trials and years of unhealthy camp life, lived to be nearly 75".

Attaining venerable old age was not only the province of medical innovators. Practitioners who combined a busy practice with the pursuit of original observations were also rewarded with "lives so long as to encourage every medical man to take up original observation, if with no other idea than that of assuring himself longevity". In short, the recipe for longevity was a combination of industry and an enquiring spirit.

But, where do we stand in this new millennium? Old age is now the norm for most Australians (76.6 years for men and 82 years for women), so what about Australian doctors? In the past five years (1999–2003) the Journal published 73 obituaries. Sixty-seven of these were for men. Their median age at death was 77.5 years (range, 39–97 years), 25 of these doctors reached more than 80 years, and the proportion who lived beyond 75 years easily exceeded the national average.

Despite its limitations, this information is food for thought. Can we guarantee a corresponding and continuing increase in doctors' longevity given the accumulating anxieties and deepening dissatisfactions of modern practice? Will their longevity diminish with the faltering of the *spirit of enquiry* as medicine becomes just another job?

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