

HEALTH AND HAPPINESS

Longevity has our society in its thrall.

In a community riddled with dissent and focused remorselessly on the individual, the one thing guaranteed to galvanise agreement is the notion that to live longer and longer is a good thing.

Daily, we are bombarded with research outcomes that promise health and happiness, and add to the medicalisation of our lives. We are advised on what to eat, how to exercise, and the optimal amounts of sleep, sex and alcohol we can enjoy with relative impunity. Comply, and a long and healthy life is ours — but in the process, do we lose our *joie de vivre*?

Japan, the world's leader in longevity, now exhorts its citizens to defend their status by abandoning Western lifestyles and returning to the tried and tested traditional regimen of fish, rice and miso and consuming less meat, bread, pasta and coffee. Reducing stress-filled, sedentary lives has become a national goal.

At home, we are more relaxed about these matters. The blueprint of the national goal *Promoting and maintaining good health*, announced in 2003, has yet to see the light of day. Not to worry; we can always consult the deluge of media advice on achieving health and happiness.

Modernity's aggressive medicalisation of our lives is captured in a caricature written almost 30 years ago: "... [a man] lacking in physical or mental alertness and without drive, ambition, or competitive spirit ... subsisting on fruits and vegetables laced with corn and whale oil, detesting tobacco ... [and] constantly straining his puny muscles by exercise. Low in ... blood pressure, blood sugar, uric acid and cholesterol, he has been taking nicotinic acid, pyridoxine and long term anti-coagulant therapy ever since his prophylactic castration."

And all for a long life!

Health in pursuit of a long life is a modern religion. But are we happy?

Martin B Van Der Weyden

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