

A CASE OF EXTRAORDINARY LONGEVITY

JOSEPH BUSUTTIL

With more and more people living to an older age, the elderly and their problems are being widely promoted, both locally and in the international sphere. While public awareness is being created to help identify and eliminate difficulties which mar old age, and governments are directing more of their energies towards the same targets, it is refreshing and encouraging to recall a case where a Maltese lived to the ripe old age of more than one hundred and eleven years, devoid of the major physical and/or mental complications which frequently accompany longevity.

Giovanni Schembri was born in Qormi, Malta, on 7th March 1757; he died on July 2nd 1868 - one hundred and eleven years, three months, and twenty five days. His case was brought to the attention of Sir F. J. and Inglott, then Comptroller of Charitable Institutions, who recorded the details for posterity.(1)

WORKING LIFE

The ancient Roman physician Galen advocated that employment was nature's best doctor and essential to human happiness, and Schembri amply illustrated this maxim. A hard worker from his early years, he was soon apprenticed as a forgeboy to a blacksmith in Qormi. Some years later, he was engaged as a porter in the marina of the Maltese capital, Valletta, where his father also earned a living.

Schembri later enlisted as a soldier in the British Royal Regiment of Malta, rising to the rank of corporal. He served in Malta and abroad, and in 1808 was taken prisoner in Capri, Italy, and transferred to France, where he spent eight years in jail.

On his return to Malta, he was awarded a small pension. But being a workaholic, he returned to employment and got a job as a kneader with various bakeries in Valletta - a work he performed until he was well into his eighties.

MARRIAGE

Another factor which was considered as contributing towards such longevity was that Schembri, unlike the majority of his counterparts, did not rush into marriage, but bid his time until he was forty. He had three daughters and a son. During his lifetime, Schembri lost his wife and three of his children.

OSPIZIO LIFE

In November 1850, when Giovanni Schembri was over ninety three years old, he was admitted to the Ospizio or Poor House in Floriana, as he started suffering from convulsive fits. In this hospital for the aged, infirm, and paupers, he distinguished himself with his good character, industry and general usefulness.

One of the problems of the elderly is that they are

deprived of their relevance and are regarded as an obsolete relic of bygone times,(2) especially in hospitals. But Schembri's old age transformed him into a valued repository of experience, and he was frequently the centre of inquisitive attention. Naturally loquacious and good humoured, he was easily drawn out into interesting conversation.

Conditions in the Ospizio were far from perfect. By the 1850s, the hospital was over-crowded, with unhygienic conditions prevailing. Epidemics occurred periodically, and a Medical Commission had condemned the building in 1848.(3) However, Schembri's strong constitution withstood all adverse conditions.

MENTAL STATE

It is an accepted fact that long term memory remains relatively unaffected by age.(4) Giovanni Schembri's memory was unimpaired; having seen three ruling powers in the Maltese Islands, his recollections resembled a historical chronicle. He used to recall: "I was about twelve years old when Grand Master Pinto of the Knights of Malta died. He was succeeded by Ximenes, who reigned for three years. Then came de Rohan, with an administration of twenty four years. Hompesch lasted only eleven months. We had to endure French rule for two and a half years, and eventually the French were ousted by the British".

His reasoning was normal, his memory was deemed extraordinary, and his intelligence uncommon. The functions of remembering are generally divided into registration, retention and recall, (5) and Schembri's memory was so clear that he was appointed a Repeater of Prayers on his ward. He remembered by heart an endless variety of old and new prayers and hymns, which he frequently repeated to the edification of some and the consternation of others!

PHYSICAL CONDITION

Giovanni Schembri was only five feet tall, but his upright posture and steady bearing acquired as a result of British military training, gave him a striking appearance among the Ospizio residents. His gait was firm and quick, and he never used a walking stick until he was one hundred and eight years old! Schembri went on occasional leave from hospital, and even when he was one hundred and eleven, he used to walk on foot to Valletta, about half a mile away from the hospital, for "private business".

The Ospizio doctors found that Schembri suffered no chronic ailments, and that the occasional fit was no bother to him. His skin was clear and healthy. The senses, including sight and hearing, were perfect. All vital organs functioned regularly. He had lost all his teeth, but his gums were so hardened that food mastication was no problem.

Schembri had clean and regular habits, was per-

fectly sober, and sparing in his meals. He neither smoked nor took snuff, his sole indulgence being an occasional glass of white wine. He had a full crop of hair without the least sign of baldness, not even on the crown, and his locks were not white but grey.

DEMISE

However on 1st June, 1868, Schembri accidentally fell down in one of the Ospizio wards and broke his femur. Complications arose, including extensive bedsores, which resulted in his eventual death.

The post mortem examination revealed that all his vital organs were unimpaired. The only deficiency discovered was a granular and rarefaction state of bony tissue, which weakened the bone and accounted for the easy manner in which the fracture occurred.

LESSONS

Such longevity - which probably makes Giovanni Schembri the oldest Maltese inhabitant on record - is a rarity. Looking back at his life style, one can draw a number of salient points.

What stands out is the importance of work and occupation, regular exercise, sensible eating habits, abstention from tobacco, a lack of egoism, an interest in people and current affairs, and finally a strong determination to retain one's independence into old age. With the nutriment of such traits, one will be investing in the Add Life to Years Insurance Policy which, on maturity, will hopefully yield an enhanced quality of life in a period more renowned for its failures than for its fruits.

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- 4 Bromley D.B., Psychology of Human Ageing, 1976, p.216.
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JOSEPH BUSUTTIL, MSc (Soton), Dip OT (Lond),
Occupational Therapist in Charge, Mount Carmel Hospital.

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