

By Ruth Ostrow

While stories about anticipated cost blow-outs from our ageing population have been in the news, I have been in Thailand attending a conference on preventative health and wellbeing.

It's amazing that we in the West still view disease as a phenomenon unrelated to the whole person, unlike traditional Asian healing systems, which take into account so many other factors in a person's longevity including diet, energy blockages and mental state. As a result of Eastern practices, the longevity of people in places such as Okinawa in Japan is staggering by our terms, and the incidence of illness dramatically lower.

Statistics to emerge from the SpaAsia Wellness Conference 2005 are heartening.

Simple measures can have profound effects on health. US studies have proved that happy people develop 50 per cent more antibodies than average in response to flu vaccines. Meditators and those doing yoga or meditative exercise had DHEA levels (a crucial hormone in longevity) of people 12 years younger.

Lecturing on my topic, work-life balance, I explained that holidays are imperative to good health. Not enough sleep leads to low levels of melatonin - important for stable mood; inadequate sunshine can impede production of serotonin - the feel-good hormone crucial to avoiding depression and anxiety. Massage, deep-breathing and sex promote positive hormone release, while stress is like a corrosive acid.

Professor Marc Cohen, founder of complementary medicine at Melbourne's RMIT, who attended the conference, said a 1970s study found that rabbits cuddled by their laboratory assistants lived 60 per cent longer than those who weren't, and a study of 1000 Israeli men with heart conditions showed men who felt loved by their wives had a 50 per cent reduction in their angina and cardiac disease.

Yet it's only recently that integrative medicine - blending a traditional with a holistic approach - has gained respect among practitioners and health funds.

Mainstream doctors have started asking the right questions about obesity, exercise and stress levels.

Centenarians interviewed have talked about diets rich in omega fats, fruit and vegetables, but most of all lives imbued with love and meaning. If we want to reduce the cost of ageing in coming generations, we have to take note of the wonderful research on healthy ageing emerging from here and abroad.

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