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Why Medical Research?

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Current Contents * readers may justifiably ask why an information scientist, ordinarily preoccupied with mundane problems such as dissemination and retrieval of scientific information, wrote a book review1 on the subject of immortality and prolongation of life. In the past, I have chosen to remain silent on this and other social concerns and left the field wide open Joshua Lederberg whose columns are now very familiar to CC ® readers. How-

ever, even an information scientist (and publisher) does occasionally think of the social implications of his chosen profession. With the New Year I made the resolution to reveal some of my thoughts on these matters to you. This was solidified by my participation in the recent AAAS Council Meeting. Since the scientific community, in particular, is evaluating its set of priorities, I think one may legitimately ask "Why medical research?"

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journal Science refused to take the work seriously—on the grounds that the successful freezing and thawing of a complex organism such as the human body was beyond reasonable hope for a long time to come". It was my belief, at that time, that Ettinger's emphasis on cryogenics, in contrast to the fundamental problem of Man's quest for prolonged life, would cause this reaction. Another significant factor in the rejection of Ettinger's work was the writing style chosen to discuss a serious topic. One felt as though it was a prolonged version of Believe it or not-the style one expects in the sensationalist press or Popular Mechanics. This was doubly unfortunate because Ettinger is serious and dedicated. Perhaps his publisher was more interested in sensationalism than in the impact a more serious work would have on the opinion-forming segment of our society.

At that time, I was working on a book concerning the problem of the prolongation of life—the only logical consequence of our then increasing budgets for medical research in the war against death. The Vietnam war accelerated and the whole work seemed

D. E. Goldman reviewed Ettinger's Prospect of pointless. Harrington's book has convinced me Immortality in Science in 1964. As Alan of the necessity to complete that work. Indeed, Harrington says in The Immortalist, 4 "the it is to be expected that The Immortalist will stimulate more work on this subject because the author, with the expertise of a professional writer (he has written several successful novels) has superbly and concisely reviewed the literature of philosophy concerned with immortality (primarily Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset, Camus, and Heidegger). He has done a masterful job of relating man's unrelenting quest for immortality to the problems plaguing the advanced technological societies today. He also draws on a wealth of psychoanalytic literature (primarily Freud, Jung and Adler) to demonstrate that the seeming differences between extremists of all kinds are, in fact, conflicting approaches to man's longing for rebirth after death and his various disguises for achieving divinity. Scientists may especially ponder Harrington's remarks concerning our need to show off before the "Computer of Excellence".

> Harrington reviews the basic literature on ageing research and correctly reports that an absurdly small percentage of medical research funds are devoted to gerontology. Of course, the equally absurd percentage of GNP devoted to all kinds of biomedical research, in contrast

to military research, is an international disgrace which cannot be repeated too often. Harrington is convinced that enough research will eventually solve the "problem" of ageing. Since we are going to master the engineering of divinity eventually—why wait? While Harrington does not admit the possibility that his generation (aged 45 or older) can benefit, he does wish it for his grandchildren and urges us to press on with the "Battle against Death". He does not provide a concrete programme of action—only general guidelines and some platitudes that will appeal especially to those activists trying to prevent man from blowing himself from the face of the Earth, no matter how long they choose to live.

The Immortalist will and should become a landmark. It does not go into detail on the highly relevant question, "why medical research?". If we are not willing to admit that the ultimate result, if not overt objective, is indefinite prolongation of life, then why bother? Shall we cure all the common and

known diseases and thereby condemn each and every citizen to senescence and a living death as vegetables? He might also have observed that while man's life expectancy at birth has significantly increased in the past century, in fact, his life expectancy at middle age has declined somewhat primarily due to accidental deaths-another badly neglected area of medico-technological research. Harrington does not grapple with the political reality facing the immortalists and especially the world's scientists. Politics is an exercise in the obvious. The public must be constantly, repeatedly, and energetically reminded of the consequences of continuing our present insane courses of action. Unless we are still afraid to offend the gods, as Harrington claims is true for most of us, we will speak out now.

Who knows—immortality may not be that far off. More money was spent last year in killing the Vietnamese than has been spent on basic and biomedical research in the entire history of mankind!

- 1. E. Garfield, "The Long Cold Sleep" (Book Review), New Scientist, 46, 590 (June 18, 1970).
- 2. D.E. Goldman, Book Review on "Prospect of Immortality", Science, 145(3631), 475 (1964).
- 3. R.C.W. Ettinger, "The Prospect of Immortality", Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1964, 190 pp.
- 4. A. Harrington, "The Immortalist", Random House, New York, 1969, 324 pp.
- 5. A. Comfort, "Biological Theories of Aging", Human Development, 13, 127 (1970).