

Centenarians in North Dakota

Gregory F. Sanders and Marilyn Smith

One of the fastest growing age groups in the United States today is the population of persons over 100 years old. These individuals, known as centenarians, now number over 32,000 in the U.S., according to Jacob Siegel of the U.S. Census Bureau (personal communication, September 15, 1982). This is a remarkable increase from only a few years ago: In 1969 this group numbered less than 4000 (Pepper, 1980). In spite of this increasingly common occurrence, we view the century mark as a magical number and dwell on discovering the "secret" to long life. Most aging experts do not believe that there is a secret formula to living into the second century any more than there is a secret to reaching 60, 70, or 80.

There are over 103 second century citizens in North Dakota alone. Of the 103 North Dakota centenarians, there are 32 men and 71 women. This gender difference is very similar to the national trend of females constituting about 72 percent of the centenarian population. Cass County reports a total of 12 centenarians, Grand Forks County has 9 centenarians, and most other counties report the presence of at least some persons who have reached the second century.

Why then should we wish to study those over 100? Three relevant considerations will be viewed here. First, this segment of our population is unique from a historical perspective in that they can contribute greatly to our understanding of life before our time. Second, because this is the extreme end of the lifespan, yet one which more and more of us will reach, it seems valuable to learn about the needs of the very old so that we can better meet them now and be prepared to meet them in the future. Third, learning about the abilities and contributions of centenarians will allow us to tap into a valuable resource which will enrich our lives and theirs.

Researchers in North Dakota have focused on doing extensive interviews with residents in their second century. From these interviews, information is gained on specific needs and support systems of the very old, historical perspectives on life over the last century, and the remaining abilities and potential contributions of someone at 100+ years. In-depth case studies result in the development of further research efforts for answer-

ing questions concerning aging in general and centenarians in particular.

The purpose of the present paper is to share some of the experiences and insights of centenarians and to give an overview of the lives of persons in this notable age group.

Needs and Supports

In very late life the reliance of a person on others for support in daily living becomes greater. For centenarians the likelihood that they will live in a nursing home increases dramatically. About half of those persons over 100 live in such a setting. Yet it is remarkable that nearly half are able to live outside an institution. One-fourth of centenarians live with a son or daughter and the remaining group live with their spouse, a friend, or alone. Many of those who are still very active live in a nursing home for companionship of persons near their age. For example, one North Dakota centenarian was very pleased with his daily life in the nursing home and said of it, "It's wonderful. This is my home." A 105-year-old enjoyed being at home with family and was able to do so. When asked if she had considered a nursing home, she said, "No. This is my best home." Another female centenarian, when asked how she liked the nursing home, responded, "I'd rather be home cleaning." Some centenarians reported that they moved into an institution when they had no other alternative. One 100-year resident of North Dakota who lives in a nursing home retired and moved off the farm at age 90 because his family felt the farm was too much for him to handle.

Most persons over 100 are no longer married (only 8 percent have a living spouse), but most (73 percent) had been married and have living children (Montgomery & Sanders, 1983). Of the North Dakota case studies to date, all but one male had been married. This man, when asked about marriage, replied, "No. No, never did tie the knot with anyone. Lotsa girls, but it'd always go to pieces over something. Should've married the first one, but she moved. . . and we couldn't see each other no more. After that, boy, I just had different ideas than them all, see." While this centenarian currently has a girlfriend, he doesn't see marriage in the future. "I'd make the big city daily then, I'd be crazy—100-year old

Sanders is assistant professor, Department of Child Development and Family Relations and Smith is a master's student in Counseling and Guidance.

man married 65-year old women—No, it'd be too much for 'em."

Often the family network of the centenarian extends five generations and includes over 100 direct descendants. So the potential for having family members available may be greatest at the time support is most needed. One interviewee had no living children but had a great tree of other relatives. Another had married around 1900, but her husband passed away 25 years ago—she had lost track of the number of descendants, but said they spanned five generations.

Persons in their second century are not, however, supported only by family members. Financially, most (73 percent) of those over 100 collect Social Security and over one-third (37 percent) had savings as sources of support (Montgomery & Sanders, 1983). Only 14 percent claimed children as a main source of economic support. Whereas the popular view seems to indicate that with old age comes poverty, many centenarians are self-sufficient and not a financial burden on their families. In fact, some of the centenarians interviewed are financial contributors to their families and communities.

Views of being 100

A compelling question for any interviewer of a person in his/her second century of life is related to how the person reached 100 and how he/she feels about being that old. When asked about the "secret" of long life, one 100-year-old stated, *"There is no secret. Live life! Drink, but not to excess. . . if you don't find the right girl, don't tie in with her—you'll do fine."*

A Polish immigrant of North Dakota who was 105 when interviewed said that it felt "OK" to be that old, *"I thank the Lord,"* she added, *"but I think it is time for somebody else to take my place."* Another just said, *"Never gave it a thought about living so long."*

After his 100th birthday, one man philosophically stated his views on being a centenarian. "I tell you, people ask me now, 'how does it feel to be 100'? I tell them it doesn't feel anything. It doesn't change you at all. . . I want you to understand this. There's a whole lot more about being 100 years old than to just be 100 years. I said to be 100 years old isn't worth a nickel. If you have your mind and can talk like I do, if you have that, then it is worth living. Every day now, I want to live more. I want to do something else."

History

Centenarians offer a unique perspective of life in the past. They are typically not the person who wrote the history books but have lived and experienced the last 100 years. Interviews with the very old demonstrate the unique lifestyle of early North Dakotans. One 105-year-old woman recalled coming to the United States from Poland at age 23 to join her fiance. They bought their farm for \$5 an acre. Another centenarian discussed his early farming career:

"We got the homestead northeast of Breckenridge, see, so with a \$20 horse in the spring of the year we started. . . We were high-ground farmers those first couple years in the soddy, used to collect buffalo bones after the winter kill and grind them up for fertilizer—yep, we was squatters, we were."

Growing up was different before the turn of the century, according to another 100-year-old: *"I remember when we had nothing. I never had a toy in my life unless I made it myself."* Many of the simplest conveniences were not always available but were certainly appreciated. *"If we wanted white flour, Dad had to go to Alexander. That was the only place where we could have white flour. It took him three days to get there and three days to get back, and he would take about 30 pounds of wheat. Then we celebrated for a month over that white flour."*

Although we often complain about the roads today, one centenarian though transportation had vastly improved. *"Well, Fargo has changed tremendously. You know there was a time when we came here, you couldn't drive to West Fargo. . . there was no road to go on and there was no road from here to Bismarck. You had to go north around the river and get up on that gravel road and go to Mapleton and Casselton."*

Modernization can be viewed as positive or negative by centenarians who certainly have experienced a good deal of change. Some, at least, seem to take change in stride. One centenarian explained, *"You know, it comes gradually. When you think back and if somebody had told me those things were going to come. . . you never know where this thing is going to end. We are not through with modernization. . . but it came so gradually that we got used to it."*

Not all changes are viewed as good. One woman perceived youth today in a rather negative light. *"The kids are very mischievous and the parents aren't strict enough with them."* Whereas times have changed, many of the philosophies and advice these centenarians would offer are, in their minds, constant. One man's philosophy for decades had been, *"The more you give, the more you have."* Another's advice to the young was, *"Save your money, invest in a place of your own and make it work. A girl has to make a living now, too. First she must find a progressive young man—that's why they are like that now, to find a good one."*

Summary

Centenarians are the fastest growing age group in the United States today. Whereas those in their second century reflect an extreme of the lifespan, many of the insights we gain from the study of centenarians may also apply to those in their eighth and ninth decades. With over 2 million U.S. citizens over 85 years of age, we can ill-afford to be ignorant about their needs and contributions.

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to the number of injuries. There were 64 (31.44 percent) clothing and 48 (57.14 percent) interior product deaths. The highest number of deaths occurred in the 65+ age group for both clothing and interior products.

There were only two areas where the four states showed significant differences. These areas were in activity for the clothing victims and in clothing articles. South Dakota showed a higher percentage of burns from open fires than expected. Kansas was able to identify a greater proportion of clothing articles than expected. South Dakota had fewer shirts involved in burn injuries than expected.

IMPLICATIONS

The high incidence of clothing burn injuries in the 20-24 year old category incurred when working with combustion engines would indicate a need for safety education programs. Greater emphasis on safety might be integrated into the driver education programs in high schools.

The high rate of deaths occurring from interior products would indicate a need for installation of smoke alarms, not only on one level, but on all levels of the home. Smoke alarms should be strongly recommended or required for every mobile home.

Individuals in high risk occupations and activities should be encouraged to wear flame retardant clothing which is available at a slightly higher cost.

The large number of burn injuries occurring in the 65+ age group would indicate a need for fire safety information to be distributed through senior citizen's organizations.

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In-depth interviews with centenarians used as the basis for this paper provide insights for further study of a larger group of those over 100. Some research topics on centenarians which seem to merit further study include support networks, continued physical and social abilities, attitudes toward life, and historical experiences. There is much the very old can contribute to our understanding of the past and of the aging process. From this modest beginning we need to branch out and continue to learn from those in their second century of life. In the near future, much of what they have to share with us will be lost.

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