

Old but not wise? Our growing anti-ageing industry

May 3 2013, by Alan Petersen

Growing old is generally viewed in negative terms in our society. And our individualistic and consumerist approach to health care leads us to believe that it's within our power to alter the "biological clock"—if we are willing and able to pay.

But while lifespans may be increasing (largely due to improvements in living standards), there's no evidence that medicine can alter the process of human biological ageing.

Still, numerous so-called anti-ageing treatments are currently advertised and available for purchase via the internet. These cover a broad spectrum, including cosmetic treatments, hormone replacement therapies, implants, prosthetic devices and stem cell treatments. Some providers even offer the treatments as part of a packaged holiday, offering surgery alongside sand and sunshine.

In Australia, some common treatments include non-surgical facelifts, anti-wrinkle injections and "dermal fillers", permanent hair removal and laser treatments.

Consumer organisation, Choice, has questioned some of the claims of those advertising anti-ageing treatments. In a review of such treatments, Choice notes, for instance, that there's "no such thing as a 'non-surgical' face-lift", and that such procedures "won't last as long as a surgical face-lift."

Despite the advertising of [questionable claims](#), the anti-ageing industry is difficult to regulate.

One of the greatest challenges for regulating a market like this is that many treatments are advertised directly to consumers over the internet. If not available in Australia, treatments can almost certainly be purchased overseas. Clever advertising techniques give the impression that there's an effective treatment for almost any age-related "condition".

Another challenge for regulators is that the term "anti-ageing" is difficult to pin down. Treatments that were long part of [complementary and alternative medicine](#) have been relabelled as "anti-ageing". These include using antioxidants, vitamins and homeopathic products.

Some treatments that have actually undergone clinical trials and are used for treating conditions such as sexual dysfunction and heart disease have been relabelled to join the anti-ageing marketplace. And there are newer, clinically unproven treatments such as stem cell therapies, that are mostly only available for purchase overseas.

Clearly, many groups have a stake in the "anti-ageing industry". Chief among these are the biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies that stand to profit from the sale of new pills, potions, [prosthetic devices](#), and implants. And then there are numerous clinics and private hospitals that profit from providing the treatments.

The "anti-ageing industry" has grown from a low base to reach a net worth of \$88 billion in just ten years. An industry newsletter predicts that it will be worth nearly \$300 billion by 2015.

If these predictions are to be believed, many consumers will, in coming years, be submitting themselves to many treatments that are clinically unproven and potentially harmful. At minimum, these treatments may be

ineffective. There's also the risk that people may be financially exploited.

The irony is, by making ageing a disease, the anti-ageing industry may in fact create illnesses.

There have been some reported increased rates of adverse events, including death, among healthy elderly people resulting from the use of human growth hormones. Adverse effects have also been associated with the use of stem cell-based cosmetics.

Older people are at greater risk because they may be taking multiple prescription drugs and may suffer harm from the interaction of supplements and drugs. Despite these potential multiple risks, there has been relatively little public debate about the pros and cons of the anti-ageing treatment market.

Growing old may not be desirable, but it is inevitable. In the end, it is better to live healthy, active lives for as long as possible with minimal medical intervention.

Provided by Monash University

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