

Active aging is much more than exercise

October 8 2014



Billiards is suited for active aging, Aske Juul Lassen's research shows. Credit: Aske Juul Lassen

The global population is ageing rapidly, and the growing numbers of elderly people challenge our societal structures, not least the health sector, which is why authorities in most countries encourage elderly to lead active and healthy life styles. But to equate active ageing strictly with health is too narrow a focus, new research from University of Copenhagen shows; the elderly can reap social and health benefits from activities that do not necessarily conform to official life style recommendations – billiards for instance.

"30 years ago, the [elderly](#) were not expected to be active at all – they were actually advised not to exercise as it was considered dangerous. Playing cards were seen as a more fitting activity. Today, we are all expected to live active, healthy lives until the day we die – in good health – at the age of 90. Old age has, in a sense, been cancelled, says PhD

Aske Juul Lassen from University of Copenhagen's Center for Healthy Aging.

Aske Juul Lassen has just defended his PhD thesis entitled Active Ageing and the Unmaking of Old Age for which he has conducted field work in two activity centres for the elderly in Greater Copenhagen and analysed WHO's and EU's official policy papers on active ageing.

"I compare the EU and WHO perceptions of ageing with the everyday activities I have observed among the elderly. The elderly do a lot of things, which I consider active ageing and which give them an enhanced quality of life, but they are also activities that would never be characterized as "healthy" by health authorities. The question is how we define "good ageing" and how we organise society for our ageing generations."

Billiards and beer can also be active ageing

One of the everyday activities Aske Juul Lassen observed was billiards: In one of the activity centres for the elderly, in which he conducted [field work](#), 10-15 men between the ages of 70 and 95 meet to play billiards four times a week.

"Playing billiards often comes with a certain life style – drinking beer and drams for instance – and I am quite sure this was not what WHO and EU meant when they formulated their active ageing policies. But billiards does constitute active ageing. Billiards is, first of all, an activity that these men thoroughly enjoy and that enhances their quality of life while immersing them in their local community and keeping them socially active. And billiards is, secondly, very suitable exercise for old people because the game varies naturally between periods of activity and passivity and this means that the men can keep playing for hours. Not very many old people can endure physical activity that lasts five hours,

but billiards enables these men to spread their physical activity out through the day," says Aske Juul Lassen.

"We therefore need a broader, more inclusive concept of healthy and active ageing that allows for the communities the elderly already take part in and that positively impact their everyday lives, quality of life, and general health. It must also allow for the fact that the elderly do not constitute a homogenous group of people: activities that for some seem insurmountable will be completely natural for others."

According to Aske Juul Lassen, one of the positive side effects of the activities at the [activity](#) centres for the elderly is that the activities take their minds off illness; they do not focus as much on their ailments when they are engaged in billiards or some of the other activities that the centres have on offer.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

Citation: Active aging is much more than exercise (2014, October 8) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-10-aging.html>

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