

By Denise Myshko

Promoting Healthy Aging

JACK WATTERS, M.D., VP, external medical affairs, at Pfizer, talks about how government policies can influence the health of populations around the globe.



Dr. Jack Watters

➔ **PV: What do you think is the most significant finding of the Economist Intelligence Unit report on healthy aging?**

WATTERS: If preventive strategies are put in place, governments can clearly make a significant impact on the public health of their nations. If governments make investments — not just monetarily but also in time, resources, and information — to encourage a preventive life-course approach to healthy living, they will significantly impact the health of their citizens.

We are all living longer, and this is a cause for celebration. We hear a lot, particularly from government payers, that increases in life expectancy are going to bring enormous burdens in terms of cost, supply, and care in the healthcare system. This is one scenario, but if we can make sure that people have information and we implement programs for preventive health, we will get the greatest benefit from the extra years.

➔ **PV: What should be the role of governments in healthy aging?**

WATTERS: The role of government is very important. Governments have to promote the benefit of prevention and preventive health. They have to create a mindset that healthy aging is about living as healthy as possible. Governments ultimately have the responsibility for the public health of their nation. We know they can't do this alone.

The developing world and the developed world face the same issues, to different degrees. India, for example, is facing issues of both developed and developing nations. The Public Health Foundation of India is doing a lot to raise awareness around health issues. Because people are not succumbing to many of the infections of a generation ago, they are living longer and are now facing an epidemic of noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, and depression. This is exactly what we are seeing in the U.S.

One of the most significant investments that any government can make is supporting vaccination and education. And when I say education, I don't just mean getting information about healthcare out to the public, although that is very important. I mean governments have to educate their citizenry and address the gender inequities that exist in education. The more investment there is toward prevention, education, and dissemination of information, the more governments have an opportunity to grow their GDP.

This is hard for many governments because often their leaders are looking at electoral cycles to get reelected. But diseases don't respect electoral cycles. We have the opportunity to instill in our political leaders the importance of investing in preventive measures with a long-term view.

Governments Can Reduce Rising Health Costs

In 2050, the number of people 60 years old and older worldwide will increase from 605 million to almost 2 billion. While it's good news that people are living longer, the number of older adults who will be affected by long-term, chronic conditions will increase, leading to a serious economic consequence as healthcare costs rise.

But when governments increase investment in healthy aging, healthcare costs go down, according to a new Pfizer-sponsored report from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Preventive Care and Healthy Aging: A Global Perspective*.

The global report, which provides a look at healthcare in Brazil, China, India, Japan, Russia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States indicates several ways that countries can reduce the incidence of infectious and chronic diseases and limit long-term spending, including:

- » **Health Screenings:** In Japan, where the proportion of older persons considered healthy and active is predicted to rise from 18.9 million in 2000 to 30.3 million in 2025, employers are required to conduct annual health screenings for every employee.
- » **Vaccination Programs:** Brazil implemented campaigns to encourage adults to get vaccinated to prevent contagious diseases. Today, 90% of people 60 years old and older have been vaccinated against influenza.
- » **Wellness Initiatives:** In the United States, where government funding is limited, large private sector employers are promoting wellness among employees through smoking cessation, diet and exercise programs, with some holding annual flu vaccine drives.

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). For more information, visit digitalresearch.eiu.com/healthyaging.

➔ **PV: What role does the pharmaceutical industry play in healthy aging?**

WATTERS: First and foremost, the pharmaceutical industry researches, develops, manufactures, and distributes new medicines, and we must keep doing this.

We need to get information out not only about the correct use of our medicines but also information about the context in which healthcare has its greatest impact. We can take very positive steps to teach what healthy aging means and about adopting preventive health measures.

One way Pfizer is doing this is with the Get Old Campaign (getold.com). This was designed to encourage a dialogue with the general public about their attitudes toward getting older and aging. The best way to know how people feel about something is to ask them. They are telling us what they feel about getting old. The more we can shape our research based on what people tell us, the better our research will be. **PV**

Editor's Note: Check out the Get Old community at getold.com and log how you feel about getting older. Are you optimistic, angry, prepared, uneasy, or all four?

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