

Contributed by Robert Preston

# MEETING THE MATURITY BOOM

In marketing, forecasting the future doesn't require a crystal ball. Demographics is destiny, they say, particularly when it comes to pharmaceutical products.

Never has that been more clearly the case than now, as the first of the baby boomers — the most-studied generation in marketing history — moves inexorably toward Medicare. Like the proverbial pig in the python, to which they are often compared, the baby boomers have created a visible bulge, influencing buying habits and creating new markets at whatever life stage they happened to be.

## A PIG IN THE PYTHON

While much is made of the fact that one in five Americans will be older than 65 in 2030 — a date so far away that it seems unreal — the most dramatic changes are taking place today. That is because the earliest boomers, born in 1946, are now 57 years old. They are mature patients — men and women older than 50 — and their medical needs are quite different from those of their younger counterparts. As such, they represent a vast, but largely ignored, new market.

At the same time, however, the boomers are facing a steep decline in the number of doctors trained to treat them. Dr. Steven Gambert, editor-in-chief of *Clinical Geriatrics*, cites two reasons for the physician shortage. One is the economic disincentive created by the government: reimbursement is so limited that it does not pay to become a full-time specialist in geriatrics!

The other factor is a dramatic change in attitude on the part of today's physicians. Unwilling to sacrifice their personal lives, young doctors opt increasingly for specialties, such as allergy, that allow them to spend more time with their families.

Pharmaceutical marketers face an additional problem: the proliferation of medications that may have adverse effects when taken by the mature patient or in combination with each other. Yet the average specialist — a cardiologist or allergist, for example, who has never taken a course in geriatrics — may be unaware that medications work differently in older people.

## WORDS TO THE WISE

Here, then, are some words of advice for pharmaceutical marketers:

- The geriatrics market is larger than one might think. Age is a continuum, stretching from maturity — patients who are 50-plus — to the elderly, 85 years old and older. Geriatrics, once viewed as a specialty, is part and parcel of every discipline except pediatrics.

- “Preventive aging” — not “cure” — is the goal in most mature patient care. Other than acute care, the most important



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drugs are those that improve the quality of life by prolonging health and function. As Dr. Gambert put it in his first issue as editor of *Clinical Geriatrics*, “Physicians must be educated to the myriad of normal age-related conditions that affect everyone” as well as to the diseases that may occur more frequently as people get older.

- Geriatrics research should be incorporated in all disciplines at medical schools. Dr. Gregg Warshaw, editor of the *Annals of Long-Term Care*, recently conducted a study of geriatrics programs at U.S. medical schools (reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Nov. 13, 2002), confirming the lack of resources and research programs in geriatric medicine. Drug companies can help to fill this gap by including geriatrics in all research grants.

- The doctor is no longer the sole decision-maker when it comes to medications. Under managed care, the physician's time is limited. The job of questioning the patient and writing prescriptions is frequently delegated to nurse practitioners and pharmacists. Pharmaceutical companies need to develop strategies for reaching these and other healthcare professionals. For example, a recent study conducted by Verispan indicates that staff at assisted-living and long-term care facilities do not see pharmaceutical reps as often as they would like. Many asked for additional information on medication management (*Medical Industry News Service*, Dec. 7, 2002).

## THE BOOM IS NOW

The booming senior market, in short, is not a figment of the future. It is part of our present. Opportunity beckons, here and now.

Pharmaceutical marketers who address the problems — either through redirected advertising or increased funding for geriatric training, both at medical schools and in continuing education programs — will reap the benefits of a market that will actually double in size, as the post-war baby boom did, every year for the next decade.

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